

How far do you think
that the play is about
the struggle for power
between men an...



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“ The Winter’s Tale” explores a wide variety of themes such as art and nature, disguise and reality, justice and injustice, but the most prominent theme is definitely the struggle for power between men and women, especially when considering the historical context of the play. Since The Winter’s Tale’s creation it has been performed to many different audiences. Each particular audience will interpret the play differently due to the context of beliefs and attitudes that exist at that time.

Many factors determine the context, and therefore determine how ‘ The Winter’s Tale’ is construed. A Jacobean audience will have accessed ideas that are pertinent to Jacobean times, whereas a modern audience will consider meanings that are relevant to a modern context. ‘ The Winter’s Tale’ is therefore ambiguous, as a number of different interpretations can be formed. The role of women is a conceptual context that is inherent within many of Shakespeare’s plays, such as “ The Winter’s Tale’, ‘ King Lear’ and ‘ Macbeth’. The persistence of the theme therefore creates a context itself, through which an interpretation of the text may be reached.

Many critics have lambasted the female characters in his plays as two-dimensional and unrealistic portrayals of subservient women. Others have asserted that the roles of women in his plays were prominent for the time and culture that he lived in. Shakespeare’s female characters are presented in a way that females can associate with, as opposed to the stereotypical Cliche of acquiescent women often portrayed by male writers. Critic Kathleen McLuskie urges feminists to “ assert the power of resistance, subverting rather than co-opting the domination of the patriarchal Bard”, I disagree with this statement, and I think that Shakespeare’s portrayal is very realistic and

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even liberating to women, showing not only their strengths but their weaknesses with an equal balance, whilst not generalizing, presenting every woman in her own light.

Some feminists find strength in Shakespeare. Irene Dash, for instance, proclaims that “ Shakespeare’s women characters testify to his genius.... they learn the meaning of self sovereignty for a woman in a patriarchal society”. Paulina of *The Winter’s Tale* provides support for Dash’s argument.

“..... What old or newer torture

must I receive, whose every word deserves

to taste of thy most worst? Thy tyranny,

Together working with thy jealousies.....”

With courage and passion, Paulina defends Hermione against chauvinistic paranoia and enshrines female virtue. Paulina is at all times fearless and eloquent. She plays the scourge, verbally lashing Leontes first for his “ dangerous unsafe lures”, then for “ killing” his queen. From the moment of Leontes’ submission to her she is the presiding moral authority in the Sicilian court. It is she who leads Leontes to his penitential sorrows at the end of the first half of the play, she who conducts the whole company of “ precious winners all” off stage at the end of the second. Paulina’s passionate and volatile words are motivated by nothing but selfless duty. She shows patience managing her private grief for her husband’s death, for which she never reproaches the King.

The fictional King Leontes abuses his adversary Paulina with sexist insults. He screams “ witch,” “ crone,” and “ gross hag”. For daring to speak the truth, for refusing to be silenced until her message is conveyed, Paulina receives furious threats from the patriarchal ruler. Neither husband nor King can deter Paulina from her vow to use “ that tongue I have” with “ boldness from my bosom”.

Historical Context is a critical standpoint when evaluating to what extent the play is about the struggle for power between men and women. In Shakespearean times women had very few rights, suffered terrible oppression. They were obliged to remain in the home, do their husband’s bidding and never protest. When a woman broke any of the sexist rules, which were often the law it was considered an outrage, even a crime. To modern day audiences this idea would be shocking but to Jacobean audiences this would have been a usual occurrence.

The most obvious character in the play to suffer this oppression, inflicted by her tyrannical, insanely jealous husband is Hermione; the honourable woman and Queen of Sicilia. I think it is a most powerful and frightening portrayal of jealousy, to which a modern audience would certainly be able to associate with, showing how power can be a dangerous thing in the wrong hands. This is important. The audience knows that Leontes has abused his power, failing in his role as leader and cannot help but contemplate whether the strong and resolute Hermione would in fact be more suitable to the position.

Hermione is highly praised by all of the characters within the Winter’s tale for being so charming, witty and spirited. She demonstrates her dignity in

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Act 2 Scene 1 when Leontes has his guards arrest her. She says to her ladies:

‘ Do not weep good fools, there is no cause.’

Shakespeare shows that Hermione can play a tender role in reassuring her ladies while at the same time denounce the accusations against her in a display of courage and strength, distancing her from stereotypical female associations.

Hermione’s intelligence is also made clear when she refuses to reciprocate Leontes sexual degradation.

Leontes: “ My wife is slippery...

-a hobby horse, deserves a name as rank as any flax-wench”

The sexually degrading language used by Leontes towards Hermione would not have shocked a 17th century audience. The play is an examination of the dangers of absolute power as both Leontes and Polixenes abuse their power for their personal appeasement. They are kings “ accountable to none but god”, a Jacobean society allowed them to express whatever view they pleased, however flawed. This however would be extremely shocking to a modern day audience. Looking at the play from a Feminist viewpoint Leontes’ behaviour and language are reflective of the repressive structure of society, where sexual degradation is a tool for women’s repression.

Shakespeare uses this language to portray Leontes publicly degrading Hermione, however her reciprocation is done honourably:

“ Should a villain say so.

The most replenished villain in the world,

He were as much more villain. You, my Lord,

Do but mistake”

She insists that he must have made a ‘ mistake’ as only ‘ the most replenished villain’ would say such things. The use of the noun “ villain” distances her attack from being personal. Hermione also uses the subjective ‘ if’, showing how she skilfully manipulates her subject. She behaves in a way, which is paradoxical to Leontes’ suspicions. Shakespeare does this to intensify Leontes’ paranoia and Hermione’s sense of justice. Shakespeare uses this contrast as a device to ensure that we can see the different powers that Leontes and Hermione possess. Leontes is superficial and brash whereas Hermione is confident and thoughtful. Shakespeare is showing us that Hermione knows how to use her power in an ethical way, in comparison to Leontes who uses his rashly with selfish intentions. She is representative of the eloquent stoicism we associate with heroines of Greek tragedy.

Shakespeare gives us a rather intellectual impression of the women in comparison to the disparaging portrayal of men. The women have a deeper understanding of morality and ethics; this is not to say however that the male characters do not have any power at all. On the contrary, their power is more obvious because of their selfish motives and exploitation of others. Perhaps Shakespeare is saying that concentrating power in one area can lead to devastating consequences. This is particularly evident through

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Hermione and Leontes. Hermione's manner is as light-hearted, witty, flowing and poised, as Leontes' is pre-occupied, sombre and awkward.

“ Sweet villain!

Most dear 'est! My collop! Can thy dam? May't be?

Affection, thy intention stabs the centre.”

The perpetual use of exclamation marks and questions, show the distortion of his mind. Shakespeare has disrupted the metre in order to make the fragmented language noticeable in comparison to Hermione's diction.

“ Force me to keep you as a prisoner,

Not like a guest; so you shall pay your fees

When you depart, and save your thanks. How say you?”

My prisoner? Or my guest?...

We also see Hermione spending time with her son, Mamillius, who seems to be treated as if he were a little younger than his years.

“ Take the boy to you: he so troubles me, 'tis past enduring.”

This may be a result of the lack of attention from his father and the influence of a man. Hermione, though tired from the pregnancy, listens to his stories.

This is an important theme, as Leontes has little time for his son Mamilius whereas Hermione makes time regardless, showing that she is a stronger parent than Leontes who is occupied with other things and I think ultimately

makes her a stronger person. It is also interesting to note the roles of mothers in Jacobean times. They would be expected to nurture their child whilst the father earned a living, this controversial role is no longer a stereotype and is purely the choice of the mother, showing how women have triumphed in their struggle for power and have gained equality.

Shakespeare combines in Perdita a diversity of qualities. At once ardent and chaste, she is witty, strong-willed and modest. As well as the beauty and dignity, which she has inherited from her mother, she also shares Hermione's humility and strength of character. She shows an inner faith in her understanding of the difference between right and wrong, and is truly disgusted by Polixenes' arrogance and snobbery.

“ The selfsame sun that shines upon his court
Hides not his visage from our cottage, but
Looks on alike.”

She is more philosophical and reflective than Hermione therefore her greater understanding and knowledge of morality in fact intensifies her power. Perdita is the best example of a female character struggling for individuality. She has by no means turned into a replicate of her father, perhaps her upbringing in the relaxed home of the shepherd and her lower profile life has distanced her from being the power hungry, dramatic character we see within the court, who simply wishes not for power but for peace.

“ The Winter's Tale” is a tragic-comedy wherein femininity is the most celebrated. However, Shakespeare provides a remarkable contrast between <https://assignbuster.com/how-far-do-you-think-that-the-play-is-about-the-struggle-for-power-between-men-and-women-essay-sample/>

the unworthy and ignoble characters of Leontes and Polixenes and the thoroughly decent, respectable characters of the Shepherd and the Clown. They stand for the lower rank characters, and even though they are male, Shakespeare distances them from the negative qualities of Polixenes and Leontes. They are innocent, with radiant good natures.

“...bid

These unknown friends to's welcome, for it is

A way to make us better friends, more known”

Here the Shepherd shows his hospitable nature, making it easier for us to conceive his previous act of kindness towards an abandoned child. Perhaps then, we should not examine the purpose of the Kings' roles as providing a contrast to the brilliant females, but rather that the characters with less power provide a contrast to those with absolute power.

Feminism demands role models who not only criticise the system but also prescribe alternatives and take concrete action. After forcing Leontes' to face the brutal result of his jealousy, Paulina assumes behind-the-throne control. Leontes agrees to marry again only with her permission, despite the pressure to produce an heir. As Carol Thomas Neeley describes, Paulina changes from “ shrew to wise counsellor and engineers the penance that will transform Leontes' tragic actions to a comic conclusion”. Combining magic with wisdom, Paulina becomes goddess-like by breathing life into the statue of Hermione. Paulina fulfils a multitude of feminist expectations, both action-based and symbolic: she confronts the patriarch, she defends the sisterhood,

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she speaks for vulnerable children, she memorializes womanhood, she worships the great Goddess Nature, she preserves artistic beauty, she strives for gender reconciliation, and she finally restores balance in the community.