

Critical studies of hamlet english literature essay

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The intense human relationships portrayed within any text will undoubtedly have a significant effect upon the character growth and plot development, and this is just as true within Shakespeare's Hamlet. Intense relationships are the main and most powerful bonds between any characters, and are the relationships that have the most significant effect upon the play. The intense human relationships that are at the very core of Hamlet have been constantly interpreted by the differing perspectives of countless people since its conception in the Elizabethan era. The three most powerful relationships within Hamlet, the relationships that have had the greatest impact in both defining and structuring the very play would be the connection between Hamlet, Gertrude and Claudius. These three main characters and the interaction between them drives the plot and allows the reader to critically evaluate the relationships of the time, as well as relationships in the modern society, and possibly to gain an insight in to the working of the human psyche. Understandably, the intense relationship between Hamlet and his uncle is not a sturdy bond, even before Hamlet learnt of his father's murder, and before Claudius began to fear for his safety. It is believed that Hamlet's distrust and dislike towards Claudius sprung from his mother's "o'erhasty marriage" and would certainly be the origins of Hamlet's suspicions. The best scene in which to view the relationship of Hamlet and Claudius would be Scene 3 of Act 4, where Claudius confronts Hamlet about the murder of Polonius. In this scene, Hamlet does appear to be acting insane, one reason for this being to throw Claudius off. Another examination of this scene shows that Hamlet could be just being cheeky towards Claudius. By this point in the play, Hamlet has discovered Claudius' secret and has proclaimed him guilty.

One perspective states that he now has no reason to show any loyalties to his uncle, and so Hamlet talks in riddles and aims to scare and confuse Claudius. For example, Hamlet farewells Claudius, calling him mother. When corrected, Hamlet states " My mother. Mother and father is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so, my mother". While some believe Hamlet says this out of madness, it is widely accepted that Hamlet would be acting, in order to unsettle Claudius. Hamlet succeeds in troubling Claudius, and because of this, Claudius decides to act. Claudius plans to send Hamlet to England where Hamlet would be executed upon arrival. The fact that Claudius could so easily organise Hamlet's death shows the fear and panic that exists within Hamlet and Claudius' relationship. While it is believed that Claudius would have always feared Hamlet, and what he would do if he learnt of the King's murder, this scene, where Claudius discovers Hamlet's murderous intentions and utter madness drives him to action. One of the most controversial relationships within Hamlet is that between mother and child, and the scene that sparks this controversy is the Closet Scene, Act 3 Scene 4. This controversy comes from a Freudian reading of Hamlet, one that shows the implication of a somewhat sexual relationship between Hamlet and Gertrude, known as the Oedipus complex. Many believe that this view of Hamlet and Gertrude's relationship is a completely modern idea that has been created by the various adaptations and transformations of the original text, is " a needless perversion of the text", and does not in any way " fit with the words and language Shakespeare uses". Although many do believe that Shakespeare intentionally implied a sexual relationship. When Hamlet speaks to his mother, saying such things as " Nay, but to live in the

rank sweat of an in-seamed bed, stewed in corruption, honeying and making love, over the nasty sty", he uses language that would not typically be used between a mother and son, unless there was some underlying obsession between the two. Whether it is sexual or not, Hamlet's relationship with his mother, his anger and disgust, is believed to be a result of Claudius' 'whoreing' of his mother, instead of being focussed directly upon Gertrude. While Edwards rightfully states that Gertrude's "remarriage makes Hamlet call in question the consistency of all women", "Frailty, thy name is woman." he does not state that the focus of Hamlet's rage is on his mother. Johnson shows that despite Hamlet's apparent anger towards his mother, "he tries to save Gertrude, even to forgive her" when he confronts her in the closet scene. Hamlet urges Gertrude to "throw away the worser part" of her heart, and to become pure again. He only wishes to protect his mother. Even though this scene shows Hamlet becoming angry, perhaps even violent towards his mother, and "even though Hamlet lashes out at her with all the rage he can muster," as Mabillard describes it, "Gertrude remains faithful to him, protecting him from the King." The true loyalties of any mother, it seems, will lay first and foremost with her son. One of the questions that must be raised when looking at the relationship between Claudius and Gertrude being whether or not their relationship began before or after the death of the King, and the extent to which that relationship concluded in the death of the King. Edwards believes that there can be no doubt as to the fact that Gertrude was committing adultery while her first husband was still alive, as shown by the line "The will of my most seemingly virtuous queen." Claudius and Gertrude are only ever left alone to themselves in Act 4 Scene

1, where they discuss Polonius' murder. They never express or confront their relationship with each other, and so because of this we have to look to other scenes where their relationship is discussed with others. The best scene available to view this relationship is the play that Hamlet has performed for his parents, in Act 3 Scene 2. This scene shows the relationship between Claudius and Gertrude as seen through Hamlet's eye, showing the purity and faithfulness of the queen to her first husband and true love, and the ease in which the murderer seduces the queen. It is believed that a play within the play, "The Murder of Gonzago", answers the very question of an affair occurring whilst the King was alive. It appears that Claudius' ultimate goal, other than to hold the crown, was Gertrude, and in order to have Gertrude, he had to kill the King, her husband. Just as in the play, "Gonzago's wife is faithful to Gonzago, therefore the only possible way the murderer can get her for himself is to kill Gonzago", so too did Gertrude believe that "Both here and hence pursue me lasting strife, if once a widow, ever I be wife". This explanation supports the widely believed theory that Gertrude was truly loyal to her husband. However it does not explain the relationship between Gertrude and Claudius, and whether or not there was a true, loving relationship between the two. The relationship connecting Gertrude, Claudius and Hamlet together is the driving force behind the play. The intense relationship within the triad is shown in the introductory act, Act 1 Scene 2, and in the ending of the play, Act 5 Scene 2. These scenes show the "contempt for his uncle, disgust with his mother," that Hamlet holds throughout the play. In Act 5 Scene 2, all characters come together for the finale, and increasing tensions between Gertrude Claudius and Hamlet come

to a climax. Claudius' plan to kill Hamlet with poisoned rapiers and a poisoned cup both succeeds and backfires, poisoning Hamlet, Gertrude as well as Claudius himself. Amanda Mabillard of 'Shakespeare's Gertrude' attributed Gertrude's drinking of the poisoned cup as pure accident and that she was unaware of the trap of the duel, whereas Amanda Johnson of 'The Hamlet Site' believes Gertrude fully understood the situation, or at least was suspicious of her husband's intentions, a theory that seems far more likely. Johnson believes that Gertrude, despite ill-feelings towards her son throughout the play, was replaced when she knew her son was in danger. Whereas Mabillard believes Gertrude remained completely devoted to Claudius until her unintentional death, Johnson believes that the intense relationship between Gertrude and Claudius was no match for the relationship between mother and child, and because of this, it can be proved that Gertrude did in fact knowingly kill herself for her son, as "this action fits in well with Shakespeare's portrayal of the most primed relationship between human beings, of a mother protecting, and even giving up, her life for her child." Throughout the play, Hamlet cannot bring himself to kill Claudius when given the opportunity, but as Hamlet's true feelings for his mother emerge, as Gertrude lay dying, he finds it within himself to take vengeance. Johnson explains that even though it appears Hamlet despises and detests his mother at times, he is able to forgive her and avenge her. As Johnson points out, "his mother's poisoning not only drives Hamlet to stab Claudius, but also forces on him to drink the poison, urging him to 'follow my mother'." Gertrude would die for her son, Hamlet is willing to die to avenge his mother, and Claudius would prefer death than life without Gertrude. These are the

intense relationships, the extreme bonds between the characters that results in the downward spiralling of the plot, and ultimately, the death of all. The intense human relationships that have been entwined within Hamlet, have had an enormous, even catastrophic, effect upon the characters around them as well as the plot above them. The mistrust, the hatred, the lust and the loyalty that is expressed by these three characters comes together to end in hopeless tragedy, but it creates one of the most renowned, most prominent pieces of literature in the western world. All can agree that the intense relationships of Hamlet have not only made the story appealing and engaging, but enchanting and something that can be related to society today.