

What do you find interesting in the presentation of isabella essay sample



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In Shakespeare's 'Measure for Measure', Isabella is a most complex character. Her nature showing often conflicting sides during different parts of the play. This ambiguity of her true character means Shakespeare can constantly keep his audience on edge, never truly defining Isabella as either good or bad, tying in with the genre as a whole, as a problem play. Isabella's character clearly reflects the complexity and diversity of 'Measure for Measure' whilst also being an important tool for Shakespeare, in allowing him to balance out parts of the play. Shakespeare first introduces Isabella in Act 1 scene 4.

Here Shakespeare focuses on her religious qualities, on her absolute nature. Her piety is emphasised through her conversation with Francisca 'rather wishing a more strict restraint upon sisterhood, the votarists of St Clare.' Here Shakespeare is focusing the portrayal of Isabella on here strict religious principles, balancing the scene perhaps in that the audience have previously been told of all the immorality of Vienna. Even from this early stage in the play Isabella's character can already be interpreted and accepted by the audience in more than one way.

Firstly her absolute nature may appeal to the audience and be seen as an admirable characteristic. However it may also be taken to the other extent, seen as repulsive and cause the audience to turn against her character. This conflict in character can be seen throughout 'Measure for Measure' and has been open to much contrasting criticism over the past. Many have argued that Shakespeare intends Isabella to be portrayed as a virtuous heroine.

Mrs Jameson, author *Characteristics of Shakespeare's Women* in 1832, comments 'Upon what ground can we read the play from beginning to end, and doubt the angel-purity of Isabella, or contemplate her possible lapse from virtue'. This view is supported perhaps on the grounds that even over her brother's life Isabella is determined to remain virtuous. Others however feel Isabella's true character is that of complete harshness, with lack of emotion and no real concern for religion. Ellis-Fermos states, 'a nunnery contains no cure for Isabella's malady and we have a shrewd suspicion that she will not end there.'

From both points of view it is interesting to see similarities appearing between Isabella and Angelo in their absolutist views, on religion and justice or in their detached almost inhumane natures of never compromising their morals. Also both characters can be seen to take falls. Angelo is willing to allow Claudio to go free in exchange of Isabella sleeping with him, the very crime Claudio is on trial for in the first place, sacrificing his ideology on upholding the law at all costs. In parallel to this Isabella compromises her values in readily agreeing to the Duke's proposal that Mariana goes to Angelo in her place.

Having refused to give up her chastity in order to save her brother's life, as it would prevent her an eternal life in heaven, too greater price for Claudio's mortal life, she says 'Better it were a brother died at once That a sister by redeeming him, Should die forever.' However she is willing to condemn Mariana to such a fate. Such similarities between the two characters question Isabella's accountability to be classed as a heroine. She appears a

martyr in that she is willing to give up her body to chastity and yet not to save Claudio.

Yet her principles set on high personal morality, mean Shakespeare often portrays her as most hypocritical, as upholding her values is often at the expense of others. Therefore if Isabella is to be classed as a heroine, Shakespeare has created a most unconventional one, making it most hard for the audience to sympathise and relate to the character. Shakespeare portrays Isabella as a strong orator in Act 2 scene 2. This is interesting, as previously we have learnt that nuns of the time were prohibited from speaking to men.

However in this scene we see Isabella's language as the source of drama, in the conversation between her and Angelo. Shakespeare's choice of language creates a most powerful case for fighting back against Angelo's judgement. 'So you must be the first that gives this sentence, And he, that suffers. O, 'tis excellent To have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous To use it like a giant' The whole scene is in verse and Shakespeare's use of iambic pentameter, creates a flow, and expectation of the audience for a creative reply or counter argument from Isabella and Angelo with the two characters often completing each others lines.

Isabella: And mercy then will breathe within your lips, like man new made. '

Angelo: Be you content, fair maid, It is the law, not I, condemns your brother;' Shakespeare uses Isabella's careful interpretation of certain words to further defend her position. Angelo's term of earthly justice, ' is a forfeit of the law' for example is used to turn the argument around by stating that ' all

the souls that were were forfeit once', implying that sinfulness is no grounds upon which to judge others, as it is a common trait of humanity as a race.

Throughout the scene Shakespeare has the audience rooting for Isabella, her being Claudio's only hope. It seems that through her oratory skills Isabella seems to be able to win over the audience for a time, convincing them to trust her by her evocative speech, Shakespeare manages to expel their doubts for a while, as her character is used to try and prevail over the evil of injustice. At other points in the play however Shakespeare uses Isabella's character indirectly to add comic aspects to scenes.

Through her innocence Shakespeare manages to create dramatic irony. One example of this is during her conversations with Angelo. Shakespeare portrays Isabella as completely naive as to his plans for her to give up her chastity to save her brother's life, yet he cleverly works Isabella's replies and comments so as they may be seen as leading Angelo on. Shakespeare's use of language can be seen to reveal an intense desire of Isabella to strip myself to death as to a bed That long I have been sick for'.

With the audience already informed of Angelo's intentions, some for of relief or perhaps tension depending on whether the audience have chosen to sympathise with her character, is created. It seems that Isabella's religious nature is often lost in the play or certainly not highlighted as much as may be expected, considering at the start of ' Measure for Measure' she is about to become a nun.

In modern productions this is often more prominent, yet it must be

remembered that during Shakespeare's time religion was on the whole a <https://assignbuster.com/what-do-you-find-interesting-in-the-presentation-of-isabella-essay-sample/>

much more influential aspect of peoples' everyday lives. The religious content of 'Measure for Measure' was therefore more appropriate than it is to a modern audience. For example the concept of hell, which in Shakespearian England was a very real concern, as shown through Isabella's refusal to compromise her chastity. Life was viewed as relatively insignificant in comparison to an eternal afterlife.

It is hard for the modern readers to accept Isabella's views 'more than our brother is our chastity' yet for her there was simply no comparison, her decision does not seem troubled but clear and absolute as far as moral grounds are concerned. However Shakespeare's use of 'our' rather than 'my' could be seen to reflect that her choice is more of a duty to her faith as oppose to a personal decision as through this choice of language Shakespeare portrays Isabella as being emotionally detached from her judgment.

Isabella upholds her beliefs however, even when face to face with her brother. Claudio states 'Death is a fearful thing.' To which she replies 'And shamed life a hateful.' Shakespeare furthers this defensiveness which becomes apparent in Isabella's character, in that she rebukes her brother when he attempts to change her mind over not sleeping with Angelo, 'O you beast!'. At other points in the play though, Shakespeare does expose to the audience a very emotional part of Isabella's character again showing how complex and contrasting her character can be.

Her emotions are most strongly expressed when she is caught off guard by Angelo's ruling that despite her effort, Claudio is still to die, in Act 2 scene 2.

‘ Tomorrow! O, that’s sudden; spare him, spare him. He’s not prepared for death. Even for our kitchens We kill the fowl of season. Shall we serve heaven With less respect than we do minister To our gross selves? Good, good my lord, bethink you: Who is it that hath died for this offence? There’s many have committed it. ‘ Here we see an uncomposed Isabella.

As her speech continues we see through her language that she is trying to gain control of her emotions once more, from repetition at the start before returning to questioning Angelo’s justifications towards the end. It becomes questionable through Shakespeare’s portrayal of her in this way, as to whether this outburst of emotion is in fact her true character showing through. Perhaps the Isabella seen previously and throughout the majority of the play is simply trying to hold herself together to the outside world, the nunnery being her escape, explaining the lack of religious beliefs of Isabella at times.

It is her refuge from all the sin present in the world and allows her to shut out much of the evil and problems life poses. Isabella requests ‘ more stricter restraints’, by living a life of order and discipline maybe she hopes to achieve removing herself from such an immoral society. However once involved, by her attempts to save her brothers life, it seems that even the most detached (from society) and arguably divine characters can become corrupted, which Shakespeare highlights through Isabella readily agreeing to the bed-trick, due to such immoral surroundings.

Isabella is as a character, a most powerful tool to Shakespeare. Her ambiguity throughout the play keeps his audience on edge, due to

Shakespeare never allowing them to clearly discover her true nature. The ending of 'Measure for Measure' is most interesting as it leaves the audience to decide upon Isabella's real character, in whether they feel she will or will not take up the Duke's proposal of marriage. Her silence can be interpreted as either a sign of resistance or an unspoken compliance.

If she was to accept the proposal she would be going against all the principles she had ever believed in, like chastity and all she ever stood for, therefore becomes completely insignificant. Isabella has for the most part of the play been portrayed as strong minded and independent, has she lost these characteristics during her ordeals in the course of events? Will she agree to marry, just as she went along with the bed-trick. Or will the confident and assured Isabella prevail and follow her own path having found her place in the world as a result of all her experiences.

Isabella's character is most complex and it is hard to define her nature with any certainty simply from the text, as it can be interpreted in so many ways. It seems that Isabella herself is not at very much ease over her identity as an individual, and also that perhaps she does not intend to explore her character preferring to shut herself away from the 'real' world and the many problems or hardships which she may be faced with.

Shakespeare uses the crisis of having her brother's life at stake to explore all the problems she has previously refused to face, giving his audience a privileged insight as Isabella attempts to discover the true her. and would mean Shakespeare had managed through the careful and skilful use of such an ambiguous character to betray her to the audience all along. The unfairness of

the audience never having Isabella's nature revealed to them, signifies Shakespeare's main point of injustice.