

Hamlet term paper

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Gertrude, better known as Hamlet's mother, and the adulterous queen who married too quickly after her husband's death, is one of the minor characters in Shakespeare's Hamlet. Gertrude is often been suspected of perjury towards the dead king and her quick remarriage is often seen as a sign of her unfaithfulness towards her dead husband.

However, in the second part of the play, when Gertrude faces the truth of her first husband's death, she immediately stands a reformed character, sympathetic to Hamlet's cause. She promises to keep up her connubial subterfuge in order to deceive Claudius.

This in one hand shows Gertrude's ignorance of the truth of her first husband's death and on the other hand proves her to be a woman with divided loyalties. This essay studies the character of Gertrude as Hamlet's mother and a widow to the dead queen.

Gertrude is often described in the play by Hamlet as frail, which he had addressed to her whole personality. He has shown this "frailty" as weakness and lack of depth in entire character. Reading the play makes it clear that Gertrude was not an accomplice in the plot of murder of the late king.

Further, whether she was an adulteress is debatable, for Shakespeare does not suggest of any relation between Gertrude and Claudius before her late husband's death. Gertrude is often misinterpreted as a shallow and self-centered character. However, a closer look defines her otherwise.

Gertrude was one who had overpowering animal instincts, in love with the baser needs of human flesh. She is one who can forget the grief of past

quickly as she has a happy disposition even under adversity, and feels all around her should remain happy.

This is the reason Gertrude is found, at the beginning of the play, pleading Hamlet to loose his sorrow and stop grieving his father's death. Instead, she pleads with him to marry Ophelia and make things comfortable for everyone. Thus, she was one of those people who reject unhappiness, and seek only the fun and frolic in life.

One can even see in Gertrude a woman who refuses to embrace old age. She clings to her youth. One almost feels that the charm of Gertrude's youth will not diminish away, instead wither when she meets her end. She mostly plays a passive part in the play's action packed scenes. Throughout the play, she appears to be Claudius's shadow, following him everywhere.

Even Claudius believes that Gertrude does nothing but follow his wishes. However, one must not forget that when she learnt the true nature of her late husband's death, she willingly conspired with Hamlet to avenger his father.

How did Claudius win Gertrude's heart is a question that reverberates throughout the play? Was she Claudius's mistress even before her husband's death or was she just hasty in marrying his just after becoming a widow? The Ghost believes that Claudius won Gertrude with his "witchcraft". The Ghost states that Claudius was "garbage" and prey to lust: "will state itself in a celestial bed and prey on garbage" .

This incestuous marriage of Gertrude distresses her son who loses his rightful claim on thrown to his uncle, Claudius. This is the reason why Hamlet fails to perceive Gertrude as a sensible and strong woman. This is what Gertrude the woman can be understood from the lines of other characters.

The very first words spoken by Gertrude is when she entreats Hamlet to shed off his mourning black clothes and be more cheerful. She tells him that death is inevitable and mourning incessantly over it with downcast eyes will flare only the passion of grief in him.

Gertrude appears to be a worried mother who is anxious to recover her son from his melancholy when she welcomes Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to the court. She says that she hoped that the two of them would be able to cheer Hamlet and discover the reason for his unrelenting gloom.

When Claudius and Gertrude are alone, he tells her that Polonius believes he knows the reason for Hamlet's depression, to which she answers: " I doubt it is no other than the main, His father's death and our o'er-hasty marriage."

This statement made by Gertrude is not that depicts a slothful woman who is just superfluous and just a shadow of her husband. Gertrude speaks to Polonius with directness apt for a Queen and describes his brevity of speech as " More matter with less art." .

We then see Gertrude again in Act III. She asks Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with little guile if they were able to cheer up Hamlet and engage in any kind of sport. But before she leaves, she speaks a few words

of kindness to Ophelia. She felt for the unhappy girl and wanted to comfort her:

And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish

That your good beauties be the happy cause

Of Hamlet's wildness: so shall I hope your virtues Will bring him to his wonted way again,

To both your honours.

This almost sounds like the words of a sentimental woman who recounts that class barriers will not stop true love from meeting.

During the scene when the play was being acted within the play, Gertrude asks Hamlet to sit near her. This gesture clearly shows that she wants Hamlet to feel assured of his place in the court. She remains silent until Hamlet asks her how she liked the play. To this she answers with her famous comment on the queen in the play, "The lady doth protest too much, methinks".

Later, Gertrude tells Claudius as Hamlet had asked her to tell, that Hamlet had become mad. She says that he had killed Polonius, though he weeps over it. She adds that she did not want Claudius to see him in such a state of fearsome madness. Later, she states that she does not wish to see Ophelia, but consents to meet her when she gains knowledge of her distress.

When Laertes bursts in to kill Claudius she steps between them and stops him from killing Claudius, saying that it is not he who had killed his father. She then leaves Claudius and Laertes together, but later returns to inform them of Ophelia's death. During Ophelia's funeral, Gertrude scatters flowers on her grave and appears to be the only one truly grieved:

Sweets to the sweet: farewell!

I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife;

I thought thy bride-bed to have deck'd, sweet maid,

And not have strew'd thy grave.

Further, her motherly affections and concern for Hamlet become apparent when Hamlet and Laertes duel. The queen feels that Hamlet is out of training and offers her handkerchief to wipe his brows and drinks to his success. When she finds out that the drink is poisoned, she warns Hamlet of the malice and dies. These words of warning were the last word she spoke.

This analysis of the queen character demonstrates that she was a woman who refused to follow the king even when all others believed her to be just his shadow. She was one who wanted to move away from sorrow as quickly as possible and seek happiness in life. But her love for her son was undamaged and she remained faithful to him when she learnt the truth of Claudius's malevolence.

Act III is an important section of Hamlet as it is in this section all the mysteries of the dead king's death are unraveled. It is in this act that

Gertrude, for the first time, learns of the conspiracy behind her husband's death. In the fourth scene of the act, Hamlet goes to his mother, in a state of complete tension and dismay. He is almost in a hysterical state.

He had even contemplated murdering his mother assuming her to be a co-conspirator of his father's death. In this scene, Hamlet quips her and insults her and even tells her he wished that she was not his mother.

She, then tries to end the dialogue with her son, she is seized by him and she cries for help. She cries out, "Thou wilt not murder me". This is not a foolish cry of a woman, but one who had seen Hamlet as a madman and one who was capable of murder drunk in anger.

It is then that she learns of the history behind the king's death with a startle exclamation "As kill a king". This shows that Gertrude had no knowledge of the nature of the dead king's death. Then the queen asks Hamlet why he was so angry at her: "What have I done, that thou dar'st wag thy tongue / In noise so rude against me?" (Act 3, Sc. 4, 86).

Hamlet tells her that he hates her passion and lust, her desire for sexual passion which has driven her from the memory of his father to that of his brother. He, in his maddened rage, cries out that she could not even give youth as an excuse of her lust:

O shame! where is thy blush? Rebellious hell,

If thou canst mutine in a matron's bones,

To flaming youth let virtue be as wax,

And melt in her own fire: proclaim no shame

When the compulsive ardour gives the charge,

Since frost itself as actively doth burn

And reason panders will.

Hamlet in his rage says that her lust throws away all morality and decency of relationships. Gertrude admits to all these accusations of Hamlet, and through every accusation made by Hamlet, she was able to see through the reality. Gertrude herself saw through her follies and realized them:

O Hamlet, speak no more:

Thou turn'st mine eyes into my very soul;

And there I see such black and grained spots

As will not leave their tinct.

It is in this scene that Gertrude stands a reformed character. She realizes that her passion and lust has been her sins and she admits to it. However, she does not want to contemplate on her sins. Gertrude does not cry over her follies. Gertrude thinks that Hamlet is mad when she sees him speaking to the Ghost. She then concedes to be on his side and makes a promise not to betray him.

Act III, scene 4 reveals Gertrude in a different light to the readers. Gertrude is transformed from a soft creature in love with her base instincts to a

mature character. She was ready to do the right thing and be at the side of her son. She was no longer her husband's shadow and had not fallen for Claudius's charms.

Thus, one can argue that Gertrude could not be the woman who had committed adultery with Claudius before her husband's death. This scene clearly shows Gertrude as a different person and changes the perception of her character to the readers.

Gertrude is a minor character in Hamlet, but one that of great importance. She is initially labeled as an “adulteress” and “incestuous” by the Ghost of the late king and presumably Hamlet too believed in these accusations.

However, the fourth scene in Act III shows that these accusations were baseless. She was unaware of the murder plot that Claudius had devised, nor was she an ally to it. Gertrude's surprise to the accusations are revealed her own words in this scene when she reveals her astonishment at Hamlet's accusations and once she realizes her follies does not waste time in idle tears and promises to help Hamlet.

This scene is also important to the play as it shows Gertrude transformed to realize her mistakes and choose a path to redemption.

Shakespeare, William. Hamlet. London: Penguin, 1992. Print.