

Explaining woman's
frailty: feminist
readings of gertrude
essay sample



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The sexuality of female characters in Hamlet is a favoured topic amongst critics, especially feminist ones. Feminist critic Valerie Traub explores the sexuality in Hamlet stating the following “ in this vile and seductive garden, sexually threatening women poison vulnerable and unwitting men” [3] which I believe to be sarcasm as the male characters in Hamlet are seen to be far more dominant over the female characters, however, this phrase could be ambiguous as the Gertrude, Hamlets mother can be seen in two lights.

Hamlet displays his distaste for his mother's actions in the opening soliloquy, where he is troubled by his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle, he describes this as “ incestuous” and with “ wicked speed! ” these words hint that what Gertrude has done is morally wrong and that Hamlet is deeply affected by it. Hamlet sees his mother as an ‘ adulterous Queen’ who could be seen as marrying his uncle to stay in the powerful position of Queen, and using her sexuality to get what she wants, as we also see character Nora do in A Doll's House.

Nora uses her sexuality on her husband Torvald to get money from him and also to deceive him from finding out the truth about her. “[playing with his coat buttons, and without raising her eyes to his]. If you really want to give me something... you might” Hamlet is disgusted by his mother's behavior as she displays incestuous love so openly and he makes reference to the several times in the play.

He sees his Gertrude and Claudius' love as “ In the rank sweat of an enseamed bed... stew'd in corruption...” The use of the word ‘ rank’ really portrays his disgust for the sexuality between his mother and his uncle. The

adjectives used to describe the bed described is connotations of rot and decay which really builds up the sickly image on how Gertrude is being portrayed, a whore. The way Gertrude portrays herself to Hamlet forces him to believe that his lover Ophelia is also in the same light.

He takes his uncertainty makes him say to Ophelia, " Get thee to a nunn'ry, why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? " Hamlet cannot distinguish whether Ophelia is the virginal angel she is portraying, or an adulterous whore like his mother. The nunnery could be seen as a place where Ophelia can maintain her innocence or it could also be another word for a brothel in which Hamlet feels is the appropriate place for her.

There is also an uncertainty as to whether Ophelia lost her virginity to Hamlet. He asks her " are you honest? where honesty here is linked to a woman's virtue. In the next scene, Hamlet uses a series of puns to insult and degrade her sexually, he says, " shall I lie in your lap" and " between maiden's legs" where the prepositions suggests specific details as to possible sexual encounters between the two, showing that maybe Ophelia is not as innocent as she seems, however, Gertrude's actions clouded over and tainted Ophelia's character, resulting in her death, which concludes Thompsons saying in the masculine world of Shakespearean drama " the only good virgin is a dead virgin. [4]

In contrast to Hamlet, Wuthering Heights doesn't appear as explicit and sexual towards the body; however the passion between Catherine and Heathcliff goes as deep as their desire to be one. Catherine states " Nelly, I am Heathcliff-he's always, always on my mind" and Heathcliff in reference to

Catherine despairs " Oh God! It is unutterable! I cannot live without my life! I cannot live without my soul! " They both want to become ' one' which can be seen sexually even though it is done implicitly as Catherine is composes herself as a lady and women in those days were very discreet with their sexuality.

There is also implicit imagery to suggest the sexuality between Heathcliff and Cathy Bronte tends to use warmth and heat more to represent passion. She often uses Catherine's fevers to reflect the intensity of her emotion. She declares " Oh, I'm burning" The theme of women being childlike is portrayed strongly amongst these 3 texts. This is best illustrated by the famous quote by Hamlet " Frailty, thy name is woman". Ophelia is seen as weak and submissive, just as a child is and her brother Polonius confirms this by calling her a " green girl" (where green means inexperienced and immature).

The fact that Ophelia is very obedient to her father just as a child should be also emphasises this point. Ophelia is typically compliant to her father replying, " I shall obey, my Lord". To Hamlet and the audience it may seem as if Ophelia is unloving but perhaps she does love Hamlet, but only as far as her childlike capacity allows, without the passion of a more mature, independent women. Likewise, in A Doll's House, Nora is also seen in a childlike manner.