

# Analysis of the rewriting gertrude talks back english literature essay

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



## Chapter 4

" A voice is a human gift; it should be cherished and used, to utter fully human speech as possible. Powerlessness and silence go together."

(Margaret Atwood)CHAPTER SUMMARY: Analysis of the rewriting " Gertrude talks back" by Margaret Atwood. The play Hamlet has only two female characters during all the play; all the rest are male characters. This may prove to many people that females were not as important in literature; that they were always in a second place. However, these two characters have been argued even more than the male characters by many scholars and psychologists since the play was written. The character of Gertrude has always been seen as the immoral person who remarries her dead husband's brother (something that was prohibited in Shakespeare's time) and doesn't care about Hamlet and his feelings. However, this happens because the author does not show us her real thoughts, feelings and emotions. We only see her through Hamlet's eyes. Gertrude has been seen as a symbol of female immorality, the object of Hamlets Oedipus complex, and as an example of female submissiveness to the male for many readers and critics. Margaret Atwood in her collection of short stories, Good Bones (O. W. Toad, 1992) has included a short story which rewrites the famous closet scene in Shakespeare's Hamlet. In this scene, Hamlet reproaches his mother for marrying his uncle and forces her to see how wrong and bad she is. Nevertheless, in Gertrude talks back we get to see how Gertrude would answer to all of Hamlet's accusations if she wasn't a submissive character; if not a strong woman who is not afraid to say what she thinks and refuses to act as a victim. Atwood short story does not expose a dialogue between

Gertrude and Hamlet; on the contrary, it is a one-side dialogue, Gertrude voice being the only one heard. By this means, Atwood gives Gertrude the voice she lacks in the play. The story starts with a reference to the name of the listener of her soliloquy, Hamlet: " I always thought it was a mistake, calling you Hamlet. I mean, what kind of a name is that for a young boy? It was your father's idea. Nothing would do but that you had to be called after him. Selfish. The other kids at school used to tease the life out of you. The nicknames! And those terrible jokes about pork. I wanted to call you George." (Good Bones 15) This first allusion would represent a response to Hamlet accusations of incest in the original text when he names her mother " the Queen, your husband's brother's wife": " GERTRUDE: Have you forgot me? HAMLET: No, by the rood, not so. You are the Queen, your husband's brothers wife, And, would it were not so, you are my mother. "(Hamlet 3. 4. 13-15) These first opening lines from Gertrude will be characteristic of the type of attack that will be seen during the story: a way to discredit Hamlet through humor, the elimination of guilt; and therefore, a rejection of his male construction of her. Then, Gertrude tells Hamlet to stop fidgeting with the mirror " that'll be the third one you've broken", by doing so she is showing us a Hamlet that moves awkwardly and a student of weird habits who lives in " slum pigpen" and does not bring laundry home often enough. Even his somber clothing is parodied through his black socks. Atwood even parodies Hamlet's purpose in the play, which is to murder his uncle. She does so by expressing that she is the one who murdered King Hamlet; furthermore, she expresses Hamlet's attitude as being the mere consequence of jealousy and an average friction between a grown-up stepson and a newly-acquired

stepfather: " By the way, darling, I wish you wouldn't call your stepdad the bloat king. He does have a slight weight-problem, and it hurts his feelings" (Good Bones 16). At the moment when Hamlet makes Gertrude look at the pictures of his father and his uncle he states:" Look here upon this picture, and on this, The counterfeit presentment of two brothers. See what a grace was seated on this brow, Hyperions curls, the front of Jove himself, An eye like Mars to threaten and command, A station like the herald Mercury New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill, A combination and a form indeed Where every god did seem to set his seal To give the world assurance of a man. This was your husband. Look you now what follows. Here is your husband, like a mildew'd ear Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes? Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed And batten on this moor? Ha, have you eyes?" (Hamlet 3. 4. 53-67) In Gertrude talks back, Gertrude clearly declares accepting Hamlet's challenge to compare both husbands. Whereas in Shakespeare's play she had no response, here she justifies her choice:" Yes, I've seen those pictures, thank you very much. I know your father was handsomer than Claudius. High brow, aquiline nose and so on, looked great in uniform. But handsome isn't everything, especially in a man, and far be it from me to speak ill of the dead, but I think it's about time I pointed out to you that your Dad wasn't a whole lot of fun. Noble, sure, I grant you. But Claudius, well, he likes a drink now and then. He appreciates a decent meal. He enjoys a laugh, know what I mean? You don't always have to be tiptoeing around because of some holier-than-thou principle or something." (Good Bones 15-16) In this story we see a twist in the story when Gertrude confesses the murder of her dead husband. Nevertheless, she never seems

to feel any guilt or have a bad conscience." Oh! You think what? You think Claudius murdered your Dad? Well, no wonder you've been so rude to him at the dinner table! If I'd known that, I could have put you straight in no time flat. It wasn't Claudius, darling. It was me." (Good Bones, 18) We can see then, that Atwood's intention at the moment of rewriting this story was to give a character a striking come back, giving more importance to their acts and feelings. Gertrude as an important part of this story deserves a chance to speak out her feelings and to justify her actions. Unlike other feminist critics, she does not defend Gertrude by saying that she was a soft, dependent woman who was doing what she was told and supposed to do. On the contrary, she creates a strong, determined character that has its own opinion and control over her decisions. In a way, she is denying the power of Hamlet to judge her. By doing so, the author makes us reconsider the values that lie behind the reading; and also makes us wonder what would have happen if the real story had been written like this.