

# Boccaccio's decameron essay sample

Literature



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Boccaccio's *The Decameron* is today acknowledged as a masterpiece of medieval literature, and its influence can be seen in the work of other great writers such as Chaucer and Shakespeare. Yet, the intellectual elite of his time rejected his masterpiece when it was first published, overlooking his wit and ingenuity and choosing instead to decry his lack of etiquette and political correctness. Clearly, he was prepared against just such attacks, for throughout his work he cleverly weaves in his defense against would-be detractors, using the narrative frames of himself in both the first and the third person points of view.

In the Prologue, Boccaccio the author makes plain his ostensible purpose for writing – having survived a bout of lovesickness thanks to the encouragement of his friends, he now hopes to provide women afflicted by the same curse a diversion from their melancholy in the form of stories. This lovesickness is quickly juxtaposed with the image of the dreadfulness of the Black Death in the author's Introduction. Here, he sets the background of his tale in a time of which horrors would still be very much alive in the memories of his readers, and hence framing the extenuating circumstances for the ribaldry and impiety that is to follow.

Indeed, “ in the face of so much affliction and misery, all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished”, and out of necessity, standards of sexual propriety had also fallen (Boccaccio 7-9).

After establishing that his story is taking place in a time unlike any other, Boccaccio proceeds to distance himself from his sordid tales by making it as divorced from reality as possible, to reduce their impact upon the reader.

Having portrayed the dystopia that was Florence at the time, he proceeds to

magically create a utopia for his chosen band of men and women, a garden villa replete with servants, beautiful meadows, and excellent mind. The contrast could hardly have been greater. Immediately, the reader understands that the stories should not be taken too seriously.

Having constructed the backdrop for his work, Boccaccio proceeds to add several narrative layers to further reduce his culpability. He introduces the female protagonists by saying how, "one Tuesday morning (or so I was told by a person whose word can be trusted) seven young ladies were to be found..." (Boccaccio 13). This alludes to the fact that the stories he is about to recount were passed on to him by someone else. This puts two layers between him and the contents of his work - the storytellers themselves and the unknown messenger. Within the stories themselves, he occasionally inserts other stories, and the combined effect of these various narrative layers is to create further distance between himself and any responsibility for his controversial tales.

With that, Boccaccio proceeds to narrate the first of his hundred tales. The story of Ser Cepperello is especially important as Boccaccio uses it to introduce the theme of appearance versus reality that runs through the rest of the book - what seems to be the truth may be in fact far from it. The story of a wicked man who achieves sainthood may seem blasphemous at first, but Boccaccio tempers it by making it clear that, despite Ser Cepperello's ungodliness in life, he still managed to perform his duties as a saint in death, increasing the faith of the people, being a beacon of hope for them, and granting the prayers of those who pray through him.

The entire tale in itself is meant to be a subtle lesson for how we should read the rest of the book. Boccaccio is encouraging us to read with our eyes open to the fact that while the subject matter may be lewd and unseemly, we should strive to detach ourselves from it and seek to enjoy the contents of the book without letting it influence us in any unbecoming way. In this sense we should emulate the two brothers in the tale, who hidden behind a wooden partition have a good laugh at the ‘confessions’ of the soon-to-be Saint Ciappelletto, knowing full well that everything he was saying was a lie. Our own morals are our partition from the fiction, and if we choose to erect them there is nothing Boccaccio's stories can do to us. Rather, the onus is on him to provide a good delivery of his stories, so the lovelorn women reading *The Decameron* will be sufficiently entertained.

On that point, Boccaccio's self-defense moves on to a new level. The first story of Day Six is meant to illustrate to the reader what exactly he thinks about storytelling. He likens it to the gentlemanly arts of swordplay and riding. He shows how it is neither the content nor details of a story that matter, but rather how it is told. In this, he answers the critics who accused him of plagiarizing ideas from other well-known tales at that time or fault his recollection. The knight in the story possessed a tale which was “in itself... indeed excellent” (Boccaccio 447), but due to his poor delivery he makes a mess of his tale, and his unfortunate listener Madame Oretta is comically portrayed as falling ill, testament to the harm that a badly spun yarn can cause.

The crux of the entire story, however, lies in her timely comment to the knight which saves her from further agony. She says to him, “Sir, you have <https://assignbuster.com/boccaccios-decameron-essay-sample/>

taken me riding on a horse that trots very jerkily. Pray be good enough to set me down.” (Boccaccio 447). The sexual reference here is unmistakable. Boccaccio is equating the art of storytelling to that of lovemaking. In that light, would not the young, unmarried women to whom he is addressing the book be able to savor that sensual pleasure vicariously by reading his stories? Bawdry though they might be, if the stories fulfill the function of helping to satiate the reader's appetite for sex and prevent worse sins like fornication, perhaps the Church should not be so opposed to it. Indeed, rather than simply defending himself we now see Boccaccio actually promoting his work as a positive influence!

However, there have been instances in the book where even Boccaccio has to admit that he has carried things too far, and a timely intervention is necessary to allay the doubts of the reader. The best example of this is Boccaccio's introduction to Day Four. Previously, the lusty Dioneo had told a story particularly raunchy and sacrilegious. He had spun a tale of how a holy man had taught a naïve young girl how to 'put the Devil back in Hell' – an euphemism for sexual intercourse. The story perverts the entire notion of service to the Lord and even seems to reward sexual licentiousness by illustrating how the young girl managed to survive a fire which wiped out her entire household and got married happily in the end. But worst of all is the reference to the resurrection of Christ which Dioneo uses to play on the holy man's act of getting an erection. In fact, for over five hundred years English translators refused to translate this portion of the text as it was deemed too blasphemous (Boccaccio 825). Little wonder then, that the Boccaccio has to devote the beginning of the next story to explain himself.

The introduction to Day Four is famous for its so-called hundred and first story, that of Filippo and his attempts to raise his son to be innocent and virtuous by ensuring he has no exposure to the world at large. However, it is all in vain, as his son is immediately attracted to women upon seeing them even though he does not even know what they are. It is significant that this is the only story in which Boccaccio himself narrates, without the safety of the layered narrative to shield him. This is perhaps because this story contains another central theme of his defense – that sexual needs are perfectly natural and people should have no need to control them. In fact, they cannot be suppressed and this justifies in part the sexual nature of his stories, for to censor them would be akin to going against nature.

Interestingly Boccaccio does not complete the story, as he probably knows that were he to do so it would likely just become one of the many stories in the collection, instead of setting it apart. As a result, its significance is made clear. The introduction to Day Four in fact marks the beginning of a shift towards a more somber mood as well, with the reign of the lovelorn Filostrato who decrees the day's subject matter to be those whose love ended in unhappiness.

Boccaccio saves his strongest defense for his epilogue, where he ties in all the various threads of his arguments into one coherent whole. He recalls the Black Death that plagued Florence, by reminding the reader that it was a time when “ even the most respectable people saw nothing unseemly in wearing their breeches over their heads if they thought their lives might thereby be preserved” (Boccaccio 799). He presents the different narrative layers as if he had no hand in the stories at all, “ I could only transcribe the

stories as they were actually told...even if one could assume that I was the inventor as well as the scribe of these stories (which was not the case)..." (Boccaccio 800). Last but not least, he emphasizes that once the storyteller has fulfilled his duty to entertain, the story is merely what the listener wishes to make out of it, for "like all other things in the world, stories, whatever their nature, may be harmful or useful, depending upon the listener" (Boccaccio 799).

Ultimately, the critical reader must heed what Boccaccio has written in the Prologue, and "learn to recognize what should be avoided and likewise what should be pursued" (Boccaccio 3). His stories "will not run after anyone demanding to be read" (Boccaccio 800). The reader who has read this far has no right to be outraged by his lack of modesty, for he has always had the option of turning away. By delighting in the tales enough to read the entire book to its conclusion, the reader has become complicit in the crime. Boccaccio has negated his responsibility to uphold morality due to the sheer nature of his job as a storyteller. The clergy and others who would have had reason to condemn the book have been caught wrong-footed and cast in a bad light by the genius of Boccaccio once again – only this time, it is happening in real life.

#### Works Cited

Boccaccio, Giovanni. *The Decameron*.

Trans. G. H. McWilliam. Penguin Books, 1995.