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The Taming of the Shrew

by

William Shakespeare

Written -1596 / Published -1623



MonkeyNotes Study Guide by TheBestNotes Staff

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KEY LITERARY ELEMENTS

SETTING

The play is set mainly in the city of Padua, Italy, in various locations. The outside framework of the play, known as Sly's story or the induction, takes place at an alehouse and the Lord's house. The play within a play begins in Padua in a public place, where several scenes takes place. In Padua, there.....

CHARACTER LIST

Major Characters

Katherine - the protagonist of the play and the shrew referenced in the title. She is the daughter of Baptista and the older sister of Bianca. She has no suitors because of her plain appearance and shrewish nature.

Bianca - Katherine's younger sister. She has many suitors due to her attractive appearance and personality. She is her father's favorite and liked by everyone for her kind behavior. She falls in love with and marries Lucentio.

Petruchio - a gentleman from Verona who marries Katherine because of her large dowry. After his marriage, he sets in motion a plan to end Katherine's scornful and unpleasant nature.

Lucentio - a young man from Pisa who falls in love with Bianca. He poses as Bianca's tutor, wins her heart, and elopes with her. After their marriage, the young couple receives the blessings of both Baptista and Vincentio.

Vincentio - father of Lucentio.

Baptista Minola - a very rich gentleman of Padua. He is the father of Katherine and Bianca. He always favors Bianca, who has a mild and pleasant nature. Throughout the play, he fails to show his affections for Katherine, the older shrewish daughter.

Minor Characters

Hortensio - one of Bianca's many suitors. He poses as her music tutor and hopes to.....

CONFLICT

Protagonist - Katherine is the protagonist of the drama and the shrew that is referenced in the play's title. Since she is not attractive and resents her father's lack of attention, she has developed a.....

Antagonist - Katherine's antagonist is her shrewish nature, which she seems incapable of controlling. Since she does not change of her own accord, Petruchio, her new husband, decides to change or....

Climax - The climax occurs in Act IV, Scene 5 when Katherine's tamed personality is clearly revealed for the first time. On the way to Padua for a visit with Baptista, Katherine docilely agrees with everything her husband says. When Petruchio calls the sun the moon, Katherine agrees with him and calls it.....

Outcome - The play ends in comedy, for Katherine, with the help of Petruchio, is finally able to control her shrewish behavior. As a result, she becomes a gentle and pleasant young lady and.....

Subplot - There is also a subplot in the play where Lucentio is the protagonist. His antagonist is to win the hand of Bianca in marriage. His plot ends in comedy with his marriage to Bianca

SHORT PLOT SUMMARY (Synopsis)

The first act opens with Christopher Sly, a poor, drunken man, arguing with the hostess of the Alehouse. A lord, returning from his hunt, stops at the Alehouse and decides to play a trick on him. He orders his servants to take Sly to his house and dress him up in fine clothes. When he wakes up, the Lord, along with his servants, convinces Sly that he is a nobleman who has lost his mental balance for fifteen years. The Lord invites a company of traveling players to put on a show for Sly. The play is *The Taming of the Shrew*, which takes place in the city of Padua, Italy.

Baptista Minola is an old, rich man with two daughters, Katherine and Bianca. He is anxious to marry them off and offers a large dowry for each of them. Lucentio, a young man from Pisa, arrives in Padua with his two servants, Tranio and Biondello. Lucentio falls in love with Bianca, Baptista's younger daughter, and wishes to marry her. Bianca, however, cannot marry until her older sister Katherine has found a husband.

In addition to Lucentio, Bianca has many other suitors, including Grumio and Hortensio. Since Hortensio is in a hurry to have Bianca for his wife, he tries to find a suitable mate for

THEMES

Major Theme

The major theme of the play is the unpleasant and hurtful nature of shrewish behavior. Ironically, it is not just Katherine that demonstrates such unpleasant ways. Baptista treats his oldest daughter rudely, which causes Katherine to hide her hurt by acting more scornfully and violently. Petruchio is intentionally cruel and hateful to teach his wife a lesson for her own good. The servants are cruel to.....

Minor Theme

The minor theme of the play is appearance vs reality. Throughout the drama, things are never really as they seem. Katherine appears to be a real shrew, but it is all a cover-up for the hurt she feels. Bianca appears to be a self-sacrificing angel, but she is really a spoiled young lady who can quickly revert to.....

MOOD

Overall, the mood of this comedy is quite light. Most of the time, in spite of Katherine's shrewish nature, the drama is comic, with Petruchio's exaggerated behavior and with the many.....

BACKGROUND INFORMATION - BIOGRAPHY

William Shakespeare is usually considered the greatest dramatist and finest poet the world has ever known. No other writer's plays and poetry have been produced so many times or in so many countries or translated into so many languages. One of the major reasons for Shakespeare's popularity is the variety of rich characters that he successfully creates, from drunkards and paid murderers to princes and kings and from inane fools and court jesters to wise and noble generals. Each character springs vividly to life upon the stage and, as they speak their beautiful verse or prose, the characters remind the viewers of their own personalities, traits, and flaws. Shakespeare also made his characters very realistic. The dramatist had an amazing knowledge of a wide variety of subjects, and his well-developed characters reflect this knowledge, whether it be about

LITERARY BACKGROUND

The Taming of the Shrew, written around 1596, first appeared in print in *The First Folio* of 1623. The play's theme of disciplining a headstrong wife is an old one. "A Merry Jest of a Shrewd and Curst Wife Lapped in Morel's Skin for her Good Behavior" was a folk ballad of the mid-sixteenth century; it told the story of 'taming' a wife in a brutally violent manner. Shakespeare, on the other hand, presents the.....

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

The play is set in the mid-sixteenth century in Italy (Padua) and reveals many things about the Italian patriarchal society, where power and control rested solely with the male. The Italian man had great freedom, including the freedom to mistreat his wife verbally, emotionally, and physically; on the other.....

SCENE SUMMARIES WITH NOTES AND ANALYSIS

INDUCTION-SCENE 1

Summary

The opening scene of the play begins with Christopher Sly, a drunken tinker. He has an argument with the hostess of an alehouse in Padua, Italy. She wants him to pay for some glasses he has broken, but Sly argues with her and claims that his ancestors came with 'Richard Conqueror'. She leaves to call the constable on him, and Sly falls asleep.

A Lord and his attendants, on their way back from a hunting outing, spot Sly and decide to play a joke on him for their own amusement. The Lord instructs his men to carry Sly into a nice room and dress him in fancy clothes. When Sly wakes, they plan to tell him he is really a nobleman suffering from a mental disorder. They also will tell him he has a wife.

A group of traveling actors arrive. They are hired by the Lord to perform for his men and for the drunken Sly. The Lord warns the players that "Lord Sly" has never seen a drama performed, so he may have some strange reactions. The Lord also pays Bartholomew, one of the pages, to dress up like a lady and pretend to be Sly's wife. The scene ends when the Lord leaves to watch the result of his trickery.

Notes

The induction creates the framework for the play. Christopher Sly has passed out at the alehouse from drinking too much. When the Lord sees his inebriated state, he decides to play a joke on him. Sly is carried away, dressed in fine clothes, and told he is a nobleman with a wife.

When the group of traveling actors arrive on the scene, the Lord asks them to present a play for Christopher Sly. The play that is presented is *The Taming of the Shrew*.

The wealthy and witty Lord is not vitally important as a character, for he has only a few lines; however, he is instrumental in transferring Sly to his chamber and creating some hilarious scenes. Sly is much more important to the play as a whole. In spite of having relatively few lines in the first scene of the induction, his character is firmly established. He is a tinker by trade who drinks excessively and acts like a clown. He also seems to be a troublemaker, for the hostess of the alehouse goes to call the constable on him. Although he appears to be poor since he is low on money, he humorously states that he is a descendant of "Richard Conqueror" (meaning William the Conqueror). He also shows off by mumbling foreign words. Finally, he is gullible enough to fall for the trick that the Lord is playing on him.

Shakespeare takes the framework of his play directly from the original *The Taming of a Shrew*; but in the original, the characters from the induction are seen more often as they interact with the actors throughout the play. In the end of the original play, Sly is carried back to the alehouse, where he awakes and thinks he has had a dream about taming a shrewish woman. In Shakespeare's play, the characters from this scene appear only once after the Induction. Critics disagree on the effectiveness of Shakespeare's framework. Some feel that Sly should be a character throughout the play. Others feel that if Sly and the Lord were placed at the end of the play, it would be anticlimactic and distracting. Others think that there was originally a final scene where Sly was brought back, and it was lost before the play was printed.

INDUCTION - SCENE 2

Summary

When Sly awakens, the Lord, dressed as a servant, joins his men in convincing Sly that he is a Lord with a wife and that he has been insane for fifteen years. In the beginning, Sly is confused and says “call me not honour nor lordship”; but he is soon convinced of his nobility when he sees servants surrounding him and offering all manner of food and drink. Then, the “wife” (a page dressed as a female) is brought in to Sly. When Sly observes how she seems to have missed him, he suggests they go off to bed. She excuses herself by saying that the doctor has advised against it. A messenger then comes on stage to inform Sly that the company of players is anxious to entertain him. He invites his wife to sit next to him during the play.

Notes

At first, Sly does not accept the story about his being a Lord; but once he is convinced, he begins to act differently. He starts assuming airs, and his language changes from prose to poetry; his actions, however, still betray the reality of his background. With the opportunity to order any drink he desires, he asks for the smallest pot of ale.

Sly’s change in nature is a foreshadowing of Katherine’s own change. Like Sly, she begins with undesirable traits, but during the course of the play, she begins to act less like a shrew and more like a noble and gentle woman. For Katherine, however, her change will be permanent, for she has found the reality of who she is; for Sly, his change is a temporary and fleeting one imposed as a joke. The scene is filled with dramatic irony, for the audience is fully aware of the trick being played on Sly while he is sucked into it. As a result, his already humorous utterings seem even more light and humorous.

Many critics believe that the induction is more than a play within a play or a simple introduction to the main action. In truth, the induction seems very realistic in contrast to the dream-like quality of the play itself. In fact, Sly questions if he is dreaming and then answers, “I do not sleep; I see, I hear, I speak, I smell sweet savours.” As a result, Shakespeare seems to be saying that life itself is really just a dream with a small framework of reality surrounding it; the audience or the reader is made to question what reality really is.....

OVERALL ANALYSES

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

Katherine/Kate - When the play begins, Katherine is perceived as a shrew. She is rude, critical, scornful, and insulting. Since no one escapes from her temper and unpleasant behavior, she is strongly disliked by everyone, including her father, who sees her as a burden. Since she feels deprived of Baptista’s affections due to his favoritism towards her younger sister, Katherine adopts her unruly behavior to.....

Petruchio - Petruchio is a gentleman from Verona who is intelligent and witty. At the beginning of the play, he is also portrayed as a greedy man who will do anything for money. He decides to marry Katherine for her large dowry before he has ever met her. When he hears that she is a shrew, he is not

Bianca - Bianca, Katherine’s younger sister, pretends to be gentle, kind, helpless, and selfless. In truth, she is a hypocrite and a manipulator who manages to conceal her true self until the end of the play. Throughout the drama, she turns on her charm and seems to be loving and thoughtful in order to.....

PLOT STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

The Taming of the Shrew is written in five acts that follow the traditional pattern for dramatic presentations. It begins with an induction (introduction) which sets up the reason for having the play. In the first act, all the characters are introduced and the plots of both the main plot and the subplot are established. In Acts II and III,

the action of the main plot is developed as Petruchio and Katherine are married and his plan to tame her is put into action. The subplot between Bianca and Lucentio is also.....

THEMES - THEME ANALYSIS

Major Theme

The major theme is the hurtful nature of cruel behavior. Balthazar is a cruel father, who makes Katherine's life miserable by antagonizing and humiliating her. He treats her unfairly, while favoring and spoiling her younger sister, Bianca. Katherine reacts by becoming a shrew to hide her hurt and to seek revenge. She inflicts her ill temper on everyone who crosses her path, striking servants, tying up her sister, and complaining about everything to anyone who is willing to listen. Petruchio decides to marry Katherine for the large dowry Balthazar has given her. As soon as he makes his decision, he implements a.....

Minor Theme

The minor theme is appearance vs reality. Throughout the play, no one seems to be what they claim to be or what they project themselves to appear. Bianca seems to be a modest and mild young lady; in truth, she is a spoiled girl capable of shrewish behavior. Kate is perceived to be.....

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. There is a play within a play in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Explain what this means. What is the main plot of the play? What is the subplot of the play? How are they related?.....

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