THE TAMING OF THE SHREW THEMES

TRANSFORMATION

Transformation is one of the most important and pervasive themes in Taming of the Shrew. Closely related to the theme of "Art and Culture," it can involve physical disguise, changes in attitude and behavior, psychological changes, and even linguistic mutation. Unlike the kinds of transformation we're used to seeing in books (like, say, the Twilight saga – once a human turns into a vampire, she stops growing and developing and there's no turning back to her previous state), metamorphosis in Shrew is not always permanent and it's rarely genuine. To complicate matters, it's virtually impossible for us to pin down the play's attitude toward transformation – its stance toward the theme is just as slippery as the characters that undergo change. This seems to be Shakespeare's point – identity and meaning are never fixed.

Questions About Transformation

1. Why does the Lord want to transform Sly from a beggar to a nobleman?
2. Aside from physical disguises, what other kinds of transformations occur in the play?
3. Can transformations be trusted? Why or why not?
4. What are some reasons that characters willingly undergo change? Are these characters different or similar to characters that are forced to transform? Why?
5. Just about all of the characters seem to undergo some kind of change, be it physical, behavioral, psychological, etc. Does Petruchio ever change? Why or why not?

CULTURE

The Taming of the Shrew is an elaborate meditation on the workings of the theater and performance. Also known as meta-theatricality, this kind of self-reflective behavior is pretty common in all of Shakespeare's works, even the sonnets. From the play's frame structure to its inside jokes, Shrew is chock full of representations and references to acting, directing, staging, and spectatorship. In such moments, Shakespeare draws our attention to the fact that we are spectators at a performance while also blurring the boundaries between the stage and the audience. The audience is constantly forced to recognize the "theatricality" of everyday life, including the relationship between social roles and traditional stage roles. Of course, Shakespeare also manages to get in a few jabs at critics of the theater.
(Those pesky old 16th-century Puritans who thought theater-goers were at risk for moral contamination and physical illness.)

Questions About Art and Culture

1. Why does the Lord ask the players to perform?
2. Why does Bartholomew dress up like a woman?
3. What's the effect of all narrations of off-stage events? Why are they there?
4. It seems like someone is always causing a public "scene" in this play. What's up with that? Why does Shakespeare draw out attention to such spectacles?

GENDER

Gender, of course, is a huge theme in the play, especially as it relates to power. The Taming of the Shrew examines the way 16th-century ideas about gender and hierarchy are tested and reinforced in turbulent heterosexual relationships. While patriarchy appears to prevail at the play's end, it's important to consider all the ways the play works to undermine sexist assumptions about a woman's proper place in marriage and society. The play seems to recognize that gender is a social construction and can be "performed" by men and women. Aside from the obvious look at women's roles, Shrew seems interested in exploring ideal forms of masculinity and, to some extent, male bonding.

Questions About Gender

1. How are relationships between men and women portrayed?
2. How do men interact with each other in the play?
3. Why aren't there any significant female friendships? What does this suggest about relationships between women?
4. How is masculinity portrayed in the play? What makes a "manly" man? Who fits into this category and who doesn't?
5. Can a man be a shrew? Why or why not?

MARRIAGE

The Taming of the Shrew takes a good hard look at marriage and, to a large extent, makes fun of the power struggles that occur within marital relationships. On the one hand, the story line and structure seem to promote typical 16th-century ideas toward matrimony and proper relations between husbands and wives. Yet, the play also goes out of its way to criticize and call into question some of the pervasive attitudes toward marriage arrangements (brokered between men without any input from women) and the ways men and women struggle for power positions once wed. One thing's for certain, most male characters' treat marriage as a financial or business transaction, where women are commodities to be traded.
Questions About Marriage

1. How do men's attitudes toward marriage differ from those of women?
2. How are marriages arranged? Is there any resistance to traditional arrangements? If so, who resists and why?
3. How is the state of marriage portrayed in the play? Positive? Negative? Somewhere in between?
4. Why does Tranio continue to pretend to be Lucentio, even after it's clear that Bianca and Lucentio will elope?

EDUCATION

The Taming of the Shrew is interested in the uses of education – not necessarily what can be learned inside a formal classroom, but what can be gained from real world experience. In the play, the theme is closely linked with deception and punishment. Unruly characters are often tricked so that they can be taught important social "lessons" about their proper function in society. At other times, education is literally a cover used to dupe unwitting figures that typically uphold social order. The play also points to the difference education can make in characters' lives – in many (but not all) cases, those privileged enough to have some kind of formal education seem to also have all the power.

Questions About Education

1. How does the play make us aware of a character's level of formal education?
2. What kinds of teaching and learning occur in the play? Does education always happen in a classroom?
3. What is Petruchio's "taming school," exactly? Does it work?
4. Shakespeare was often bagged on for not being educated enough. Does this influence how you read the play? Why or why not?

SOCIETY AND CLASS

Although we often think of The Taming of the Shrew as being solely interested in the nuances of the 16th-century bourgeois elite, it does much to highlight differences between social classes. In the frame story, Shakespeare goes out of his way to demonstrate the discrepancies between the powerless and lower class Christopher Sly and the noble Lord. Attention to such social disparity carries over into the inset play, where we're asked to recognize the similarities between class hierarchy and the gender hierarchy within the merchant class.

Questions About Society and Class

1. How does the Induction draw out attention to social disparity?
2. What is the effect of Sly naming a long list of all the jobs he has held? What does this reveal about Sly?

3. Why does Kate complain that Petruchio treats her worse than a beggar? What does this suggest about Kate's social position?

4. How would you describe the characteristics and interests of the upper-middle-class figures in the inset play?

FAMILY

Familial relationships are an important theme in The Taming of the Shrew. Aside from the obvious husband-wife relations, the play also portrays tumultuous father-daughter bonds, sibling rivalry, and power struggles between fathers and sons. As a comedy, the play seems to be outwardly working toward the reunification of the family, and it's true that by the end, order seems to have been restored. Yet, Shrew also leaves open the possibility that all is not well. Kate and Bianca never come to terms as siblings, fathers seem to forgive their children a bit too easily, and we're not quite sure what will happen off-stage when married couples return to the privacy of their own homes.

Questions About Family

1. How are families portrayed in the play? What do they look like? How do family members interact?

2. Why does Petruchio so frequently mention that his father is dead?

3. Why don’t we see any mothers in Shrew?

4. Why do Bianca and Kate get married? How do we arrive at an answer to this?

LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

In The Taming of the Shrew it's nearly impossible to talk about language without discussing power. In the play language is often synonymous with physical violence and, in some cases, speech acts are more harmful than combat or physical means of torture. Even when witty arguments are used as a device for comic relief or functions as a stand in for sexual foreplay, its relationship to power and hierarchy is undeniable. Language also goes a long way to characterize various figures in the play. As in any text, one’s rhetorical skill can reveal a character’s social standing, motivations, fears, and attitudes.

Questions About Language and Communication

1. What is the relationship between language and power in the play?

2. Why is it so important for Petruchio to control Katherine’s speech?
3. Grumio has a tendency toward idiotic literal mindedness. Why does Shakespeare include scenes in which Grumio misinterprets so many commands and questions?

4. How does Lucentio's speech change after he sees Bianca?