

Feminist Criticism: 10 Things I Hate About *Shrew*

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COM 516: Rhetorical Criticism

Dr. Rico Self

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Dear Editor,

Included with this letter is my final draft of my feminist criticism. Please accept this essay as this is my best effort into looking into Shakespearean literature in comparison to 1990s romantic comedy movies. The thesis of my piece is clear in the WHC format with the addition of reframing in the “What” section. I have taken into account your comments about adding a literature review. I have revisited my sources and found more beneficial information to prove my piece as worthy for feminist criticism and publication. My historical context has been condensed which allowed me to provide more of my analysis in line with the given page limit. I focused on your comment to ground my work more within the methods provided in class. My piece surrounds Foss’ ideas on feminist criticism and I am hopeful this is more to your liking. I have put my best into this piece and am proud of my work.

I hope you enjoy this piece and decide to accept it into your journal. (Thank you for a great semester!)

Sincerely,

Caitlin McAuliffe

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One of Shakespeare's most famous plays, "The Taming of the Shrew," shed light on the lack of feminist ideals in 1600s England. The story surrounds the so-called shrew, Katherine, who could not secure a husband due to her difficult behavior. However, her younger sister Bianca had many suitors in line. In order for their father, Baptista, to allow Bianca to marry, he required Katherine, also known as Kate, to marry first. This Shakespearean play has been adapted to many different stories, the most famous being the musical "Kiss Me Kate" and the movie "10 Things I Hate About You." As this narrative is a popular choice for modern adaptations, unpacking the oppression within the original Shakespearean play is crucial. "The Taming of the Shrew" continues to be popular despite its outdated views of women, priming it for a feminist rhetorical analysis of the piece. The original piece and the adaptation, "10 Things I Hate About You" are worthy of feminist criticism in order to see how older stories can be adapted to fit new audiences but still respectfully honor the classic narrative.

In this essay, I will be exploring how the incorporation of feminist ideals in "10 Things I Hate About You" alters the plot from the original inspiration, "The Taming of the Shrew." Although this movie was released in 1999, its content continues to connect with audiences today. The group the movie surrounds exemplifies the typical stereotypes of high school students—the nerd, the rebel, the "it" girl, the new kid, the slacker, and the popular kid. Each of these stereotypes fits the 1990s high school experience (. However, these characters were initially

written in 1623, though it is argued to be written much earlier (“Data and Sources,” n.d.). After 400 years, the storyline has been portrayed on stage, in text, and in film, leading my investigation into why this story, amongst so many others, has become a distinction of the growth of feminist ideas in modern day. “The Taming of the Shrew” supports a patriarchal society through oppressing women and diminishing their place in society, while the female characters in “10 Things I Hate About You” through reframing embrace going against the patriarchy and fight the stereotypes placed on women. Kat Stratford fights the stereotype of a high school girl—boy-crazy, dumb, dull, and selfish. Her character in Shakespeare's “The Taming of the Shrew,” Kate, is less empowered and more "wild and brash" (“The taming...”, n.d.). In the movie adaptation, her actions are fueled by the desire to look out for her sister's best interests and fulfill her dream of attending Sarah Lawrence University (Junger & Smith, 1999). Contrastingly, her younger sister Bianca is the more stereotypical teenage girl—boy-crazy, a little naive, extremely social, popular, and a girly girl (Junger & Smith, 1999). However, through the movie’s reframing of the story, these two characters are able to form and maintain their own strong personalities. The men in their lives do not diminish their importance or self-determination to achieve their goals.

My analysis will contribute to the ongoing conversation about feminism in film and writing. This movie is not an obvious or common artifact in the feminist genre. However, it exemplifies the strides women have made in gaining equality. These are two strong female characters that women and teenagers can still relate to today. Each of the girls' storylines from both “The Taming of the Shrew” and “10 Things I Hate About You” can be viewed as a commentary on the feminist movement. Through a feminist lens, we see how Kat and Bianca’s characters are allowed to be genuinely themselves and be accepted in the modernized story. The

reframing of the inherently non-feminist ideals in “The Taming of the Shrew” into the feminist, independent characters of “10 Things I Hate About You” opens up pathways for other classic narratives to be adjusted and modernized to reduce oppression.

Literature Review

English men in the 16th and 17th centuries held strong beliefs about women’s roles in society. Women had limited opportunities due to the strong patriarchal ideals running English society. These women, as we see in “The Taming of the Shrew” are not able to be their own person, they are only believed to be an extension of their husbands and regarded as property. In 1558, Queen Elizabeth I rose to power. She contradicted many beliefs of the patriarchal society by being well educated in mathematics, other languages, history, and politics (“Women in the 16th...,” 2025, para. 2). Despite a female leading the country, England did not change their patriarchal ideals. Women who spoke up risked their lives. An example of this is Anne Askew who was tried for heresy, imprisoned, and eventually burned at the stake for speaking out against the oppression of women (“Women in the 16th...,” 2025, para. 2). It was not enough for English men to see a woman successfully leading their country for them to allow their wives and daughters the same freedoms as men.

Moving forward to 20th century America, the Third Wave of feminism began. The new wave of feminism focused on including different socio economic, race, and gender identities that were facing hardship, fostering the idea of the intersectionality of identities that affect how individuals are treated in society (“Feminism...,” 2020, para. 1). A catalyst of this movement was the Anita Hill hearings in 1991. Hill testified against Clarence Thomas, a U.S. Supreme Court nominee for sexual harassment. The two worked together at the Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (“Feminism...,” 2020, para. 2). Hill’s

testimony included stories of Thomas pressuring her to go out with him and saying inappropriate sexual comments to her at the office. Anita Hill taking her harassment to trial, sparked more mistreated women to speak out about their abusers, creating a space for women to unite and share their grievances (“Feminism...,” 2020, para 4). An additional aspect to the third wave of feminism is the new genre of music that tackled many problems women were having in American society. In 1994, punk rock groups with obvious feminist messaging and undertones, called the Riot Grrrl Movement, began calling out injustice and misogyny within their lyrics (“Feminism...,” 2020, para. 9). This music discussed “sexism, patriarchy, abuse, racism, sexuality and rape,” with the main bands being Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy (“Feminism...,” 2020, para. 14). It should not be lost on audiences of “10 Things I Hate About You” that Kat’s favorite bands are Riot Grrrl punk rock bands.

Moving to rhetorical criticism content, Foss (1988) defines feminist criticism as an analysis “to identify the stereotypical views of women they portrayed, how those stereotypes were created, and the harmful effects of those stereotypes on our culture” (p. 143-144). She argues that three values of feminism need to be reframed in order for older narratives to fit modern audiences (1988, p. 142). The first is equality meaning everyone deserves the same amount of respect and the same opportunities to express themselves. Every character should be treated as equal politically and socially. Secondly, the concept that everyone’s life experiences are worth something is what Foss describes as immanent value. Immanent value increases the humanization of each character. Kat and Bianca are not just their ability to be wives later on in their lives—they have interests and passions they want to follow. Self-determination is the third factor which includes the intrinsic belief that all people should be able to make their own life

decisions (1988, p. 143). No person, specifically men, can tell others what their lives should entail. It is up to each individual to find their path.

Foss poses the idea of reframing as a way to shift the perspectives into new vantage points and is the “drawing of a different frame around the same set of circumstances” (1988, p. 150). The idea of reframing perfectly aligns with the artifacts chosen for this criticism. The story and characters from the original play were reframed to fit a modern audience fixing many of the injustices seen in Shakespeare’s work. Reframing and the three aspects—equality, immanent value, and self-determination—of feminist criticism proposed by Foss will guide my analysis of these pieces.

Feminist Criticism: “The Taming of the Shrew”

Shakespeare’s anti-feminist ideas are highlighted in the character descriptions, the plot, and the title of “The Taming of the Shrew.” The designation of Katherine as a shrew means she lacks the traits women in the 16th century are supposed to embody—compliance, innocence, and vulnerability and is instead difficult and improper. Shakespeare outright infers that Kate is an improper and uncontrollable woman, which is every man’s worst nightmare in that time period, especially Baptista. When Bianca has many potential suitors, Baptista makes it known that Bianca can only marry once Kate is married. Baptista, wanting to keep his prized possession, Bianca, thought this would never occur because of Kate’s unmanageable behavior. Equality is drastically lacking in “The Taming of the Shrew” between genders. The mere fact that Baptista is the one to decide who and when his daughters marry highlights gender inequality, but it is taken a step further in how women are treated in their marriages. Katherine is abused in her marriage since she initially does not embody the traditional attributes of a wife.

Continuing with Foss' themes, the lack of self-determination is seen as Lucentio, one of Bianca's suitors, creates a plan to tame Kate and acquire Bianca for himself. Petruchio arrives in Padua from Verona, hears about the untamable Katherine and says he will marry shrew and transform her into an obedient wife. He does not take into consideration what Kate may want. Petruchio begins his taming by making them leave their wedding early, only to go to his house where he starves her and does not allow her to sleep. In order to allow Kate to return to Padua to see her family, Petruchio forces her to admit that the sun is the moon—beginning to brainwash her to always agree with him no matter how absurd it seems to her. At the end of the play, Petruchio makes a bet with other men to see who has the most obedient wife. Each man calls their wife over, but Katherine appears first. He then asked her to speak about the duty and submission women owe their husbands and tells him to kiss her. The play ends with Petruchio winning the bet for having the most obedient wife as he seems to have stripped away any and all of Kate's unique qualities. Petruchio and Lucentio do not consider their wives' immanent value. They disregard their experiences, perceptions, and opinions as they objectify the women as theirs to own.

The patriarchal ideas are extremely prevalent in the story, but Kate's final speech is the most obvious evidence. Act 5, Scene 2 includes the bet and Kate's final monologue that surrounds this idea, "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, thy head, thy sovereign, one that cares for thee, and for thy maintenance commits his body...and craves no other tribute at thy hands but love, fair looks, and true obedience—Too little payment for so great a debt. Such duty as the subject owes the prince, even such a woman oweth to her husband," ("The taming...", p. 221). It has long been argued if this final monologue is submission or performative compliance. It seems unlikely that such a stubborn character completely loses herself due to the influence of

one man, but if that is the case, then the argument for patriarchal ideology being woven through this story is supported. Either way, the ending feels as if the men won. Further, we see the lack of equality, immanent value, and self-determination as Petruchio and Lucentio obtained obedient wives, Baptista no longer has to care for his daughters, and Kate is now a so-called perfect, obedient lady.

Feminist Criticism: “10 Things I Hate About You”

The adaptation of “The Taming of the Shrew” is a reframing of the patriarchal, male-dominated world in which the original story took place. The mere fact that the story was moved to America symbolizes the feminist reframing of the story. Kat Stratford is someone many women can relate to. She combats the patriarchy, reads constantly, and finds no reason to comply with toxic men, all of which most modern women support. It is apparent that Kat is a strong-willed, independent, and free-thinking person, but she is considered problematic and difficult by her teachers, classmates, and even her own father staying true to that aspect of the original story (Junger & Smith, 1999).

Kat is an outright feminist supporting the equality of genders and combating the oppressive patriarchy. She craves independence and the freedom to do as she pleases, which serves as the underlying theme of the movie. Kat goes against most of the high school students as she is interested in rock bands and reading rather than clothes and gossip (Junger & Smith, 1999). On the contrary, Bianca exudes less feminist ideals, as she is already the perfect, docile, agreeable girl that society craves and desires to fit in (Junger & Smith, 1999). However, through the sisters' budding friendship, Bianca becomes stronger and more independent and Kat learns to be more open to others through their strengthened bond.

Equality is drastically unseen in “The Taming of the Shrew” between genders. The mere fact that Baptista is the one to decide who his daughters marry and when highlights gender inequality, but it is taken a step further in how women are treated in their marriages. As discussed above, Katherine is abused in her marriage since she initially does not embody the traditional attributes of a wife. However, we see this gender imbalance change in the movie adaptation. Kat and Bianca, despite heeding their father’s warning about boys, still date and befriend boys.

The sisters in “10 Things I Hate About You” are able to make their own dating decisions, connecting to Foss’ idea of self-determination. Unlike the adaptation, the original Shakespearean story has a distinct sense of domination that men throughout history have had against women. Bell Hooks, a well-respected feminist theorist shares that the ideology of domination is “the belief in a notion of superior and inferior, and its concomitant ideology—that the superior should rule the inferior,” (Foss, 1988, p. 142). Domination of Katherine Stratford in “The Taming of the Shrew” is Petruchio’s goal throughout the entire play. I would argue the two sisters in Shakespeare’s tale were considered unattainable, meaning Bianca, and untamable, Kat. In the case of the movie adaptation, I would say each sister is just considered unattainable due to the need of dominating women vanishing from the 1999 movie.

Immanent value is seen through Patrick’s acceptance and genuine interest in Kat in comparison to Petruchio’s interest in Katherine being based solely on challenge. Patrick sees Kat’s worth from her experiences, perspectives, and intelligence. The story was reframed in order for the female characters to gain their own identities and passions. Patrick and Cameron see the value in each of the sisters, which was not possible in “The Taming of the Shrew” as women were widely regarded as objects.

The ending to the movie is where the similarity between the two stories grows weakest. Kat's father, known to be overprotective, enrolls Kat at her dream college which will allow her to grow in her independence and academics supporting her self-determination (Junger & Smith, 1999). Additionally, Kat finds out about Joey, adapted from Bianca's multiple suitors in the play, paying Patrick, adapted from Petruchio, to date Kat so he could take Bianca out—representing the bet Petruchio places. Finding out the truth essentially ruins the relationship they had begun, but seeing Kat's immanent value, Patrick uses the money to buy the guitar Kat has wanted for years. The movie ends with Kat forgiving Patrick and then kissing as a band plays the punk rock song, "I Want You to Want Me" by Letters to Cleo (Junger & Smith, 1999). An ending that could not be further from the play's as Kat and Bianca choose their own futures. Like the two sisters, the two portrayals of this story share similarities, but for the story to maintain its relevancy, it was essential to reframe the outdated setting and treatment of others.

Conclusion

Feminist rhetorical criticism reveals how gender roles and power dynamics have changed throughout time. This form of analysis is applicable to stories written over 400 years ago and stories created today due to its study of resistance and oppression. Examining the play "The Taming of the Shrew" and its movie adaptation "10 Things I Hate About You" exposes the altering of female agency and autonomy. The variation in the treatment, respect, and expectations of women are extremely prevalent in these pieces as they provide stark contrasts of feminist ideals spanning over 400 years.

This criticism contributes to the ongoing fight for feminist ideals and to the never-ending evaluation of art. The relevancy of Shakespeare's writings today supports future discussion and adaptations of this piece. It is essential to review older works to see where we have grown and

regressed as a society. Feminist criticism acknowledges how many artifacts reinforce the idea of hierarchies in gender and autonomy. Shakespeare's work contributed to the silencing of women, while the movie adaptation granted the female characters independence and the freedom to choose their own path. Through analyzing Foss' three aspects of feminism and the reframing of the original story, it allows audiences to see the progress the feminist movements have made. The 1998 movie highlights the difference in power from the 16th or 17th century to the 20th century and from this, more classic stories can be adapted to support modern ideas of how individuals and communities should be treated.

An extra layer can be added by comparing the two diverse stories to the current 21st century feminism. Katherine and Bianca in both stories embody the ongoing struggles women face when striving for equality. I cannot help but relate this to our current political climate. Women and the LGBTQ communities are being targeted. These groups are losing the rights so many of them worked to obtain. Not only have these communities always faced backlash, but there was a glimmer of hope for women in 1973 with *Roe v. Wade* and for LGBTQ individuals in 2015 with the ruling of *Obergefell v. Hodges*. These once exciting and freeing laws are being revoked now, causing a regression of the freedom people before us fought for. Women are losing the power to choose what to do with their own bodies, similar to Katherine being forced to marry Petruchio against her will. Women being controlled by different forces of power is only a repeating narrative.

It is as if society will never stop trying to tame the shrew, but like Kat Stratford, it is ever important to fight against societal expectations and injustices and stay true to yourself. With pieces of feminist criticism like this, there is hope for a future that has more women like Bianca that dare to punch Joey—who mistreated her, her sister, and Cameron—in the face.

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