

Feminist and Psychoanalytic Criticism of Female Characters in Tragedy

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Annotation: This passage explores how female characters in Shakespeare's tragedies have been examined through feminist and psychoanalytic criticism. It highlights how feminist criticism sheds light on the restrictive gender roles imposed on characters like Ophelia, Desdemona, and Cordelia, while also recognizing figures like Lady Macbeth, Goneril, and Regan who challenge patriarchal norms. Psychoanalytic criticism investigates the unconscious motivations and internal psychological conflicts of female characters, using theories from Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva. The analysis focuses on characters' desires, identity crises, and repressed emotions, revealing how these aspects influence their tragic ends. Together, these approaches present a multidimensional understanding of the psychological and social realities faced by Shakespeare's women.

Key Words: Shakespearean tragedy, female characters, feminist criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, patriarchy, gender roles, madness, repression, identity, agency, Ophelia, Desdemona, Cordelia, Lady Macbeth, Lacan, Freud, Hysteria, power dynamics

The study of female characters in Shakespeare's tragedies has evolved significantly over time, with various critical approaches offering new insights into their roles, agency, and psychological depth. Two of the most influential perspectives are feminist criticism and psychoanalytic criticism, both of which examine the ways in which women in Shakespeare's plays reflect and challenge patriarchal ideologies. Feminist criticism focuses on the societal constraints placed upon female characters, analyzing their resistance to or submission to male authority. In contrast, psychoanalytic criticism delves into the psychological motivations, unconscious desires, and internal conflicts that shape these women's actions and fates. Together, these perspectives provide a comprehensive understanding of Shakespeare's tragic heroines, revealing the complexity of their representation and their significance within the dramatic structure of his plays. Feminist Criticism of Female Characters in Shakespearean Tragedy. Feminist literary criticism emerged as a distinct analytical framework in the 20th century, focusing on the ways in which literature reinforces or subverts gender norms.

When applied to Shakespeare's tragedies, this approach highlights how female characters are often trapped within patriarchal structures that limit their autonomy and define their value in relation to men. Feminist scholars argue that many of Shakespeare's women, such as Desdemona (Othello), Ophelia (Hamlet), and Cordelia (King Lear), are victims of male-dominated societies where their voices are silenced, and their fates are dictated by the men around them. Ophelia, for example, is frequently interpreted as a tragic figure whose madness and eventual death result from the oppressive control of her father, Polonius, and her lover, Hamlet. Feminist critics view her character as a representation of the limited choices available to women in Elizabethan society—forced to either conform to patriarchal expectations or be cast aside. Similarly, Desdemona's fate in Othello reflects the dangers of a world where women's loyalty and virtue are questioned, leading to violence and injustice. However, feminist readings of Shakespeare's tragedies also acknowledge that some female characters display agency and challenge gender norms, even if they ultimately face tragic ends. Lady Macbeth (Macbeth), Goneril, and Regan (King Lear) defy traditional notions of female passivity by pursuing power and ambition. Although their defiance is often met with harsh consequences, their presence in the plays suggests a critique of rigid gender roles, exposing the instability of patriarchal authority.

Psychoanalytic Criticism of Female Characters in Shakespearean Tragedy. Psychoanalytic criticism, rooted in the theories of Sigmund Freud and later expanded by figures like Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, explores the unconscious motivations and internal conflicts of literary characters. When applied to Shakespeare's female characters, this approach examines how their psychological struggles reflect deeper anxieties about gender, identity, and power. One of the key psychoanalytic interpretations of Shakespearean tragedy involves the concept of repression and desire. Lady Macbeth, for instance, has been analyzed through a Freudian lens as a character who suppresses traditional feminine qualities in favor of ambition and aggression. Her famous invocation to "unsex me here" demonstrates her attempt to reject perceived female weakness and adopt traits associated with masculinity. However, her eventual descent into guilt and madness suggests that the repression of her emotions leads to psychological disintegration. Ophelia's madness has also been extensively studied from a psychoanalytic perspective. Freud's notion of hysteria has been applied to her character, with critics suggesting that her erratic behavior and nonsensical speech are expressions of repressed trauma and grief. Lacanian critics, on the other hand, interpret her descent into madness as a loss of identity, arguing that she becomes "the nothing" when she is no longer defined by her relationships with men. Another psychoanalytic

interpretation involves the Oedipal and Electra complexes, where characters' relationships with parental figures shape their psychological development. In *King Lear*, for example, the conflict between Cordelia and her father can be analyzed as an exploration of familial bonds, power dynamics, and subconscious desires. Lear's rejection of Cordelia and his subsequent suffering highlight the deep psychological and emotional ties between father and daughter, as well as the devastating consequences of misinterpreted love and loyalty.

Both feminist and psychoanalytic criticism provide valuable frameworks for understanding the female characters in Shakespeare's tragedies. While feminist analysis reveals the ways in which these women are constrained by patriarchal systems, psychoanalytic interpretations uncover the deep-seated psychological conflicts that shape their behaviors and ultimate fates. Together, these perspectives offer a richer, more nuanced understanding of Shakespeare's heroines, demonstrating that their roles extend beyond mere secondary figures to central, complex participants in the unfolding tragedy. By examining their struggles, desires, and agency through these critical lenses, scholars continue to uncover new meanings and interpretations of Shakespeare's timeless works.

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