

The Taming of the Shrew

Sample Analytical Paper Topics

The following theses and outlines are provided to help you construct successful paper topics and to organize essays which reflect the complexity of the text. These outlines can also aid your efforts to review the play's critical themes and issues.

TOPIC #1

Many characters in *The Taming of the Shrew* take on different identities, while the behavior of two characters changes drastically by the end of the play. Describe three to four ways in which *The Taming of the Shrew* develops the idea that appearances should not be confused with reality.

Outline

I. Thesis Statement: *In The Taming of the Shrew, Shakespeare develops the theme of appearances versus reality by means of the Induction, disguises, and changes in attitude of the major characters.*

II. Appearance versus reality in the Induction

- A. The Lord dresses Sly as a nobleman.
- B. The Lord's page, Bartholomew, is presented as Sly's wife.
- C. Crossdressing was used in original performances of *Shrew*.
 - 1. Petruchio points to Kate as a boy twice.
 - 2. Biondello alludes to Bianca as a boy with his pun on "appendix."
 - 3. Kate signals that she is really a boy in her long speech.

III. Disguises suggest that appearances cannot be relied upon.

- A. Lucentio and Hortensio assume identities below their station.
- B. Tranio and the Pedant pretend to be wealthy men.
- C. Shakespeare uses the theme of "counterfeit supposes," taken from another English playwright, as his own device.

IV. Remarkable shifts in behavior alert the audience to the possibility of masquerade and deception.

- A. Petruchio flatters and then harrasses Kate, as if in a game.
- B. Kate alters her behavior to please Petruchio, but the audience may not be convinced of her sincerity.
- C. Petruchio seems interested only in appearances.
 - 1. He explains to the men that he and Kate will fight openly while treating each other cordially in private.
 - 2. He appears concerned more with his image before the other men than with developing a sincere relationship with Kate.
- D. Grumio imitates Petruchio in an absurd way. This also suggests that Petruchio may be doing the same, but convincingly so.
- E. Bianca behaves coyly, then becomes a shrewish wife at the play's end.

- V. Conclusion:** Through the behavior and disguises of the characters, as well as the crossdressing on the Elizabethan stage, *The Taming of the Shrew* emphasizes that appearances are easily mistaken for reality, both in life and in the theater.

TOPIC #2

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Petruchio employs various strategies to trick or to coerce his wife into obedience. Describe the methods Petruchio uses to tame his “shrew,” and evaluate his effectiveness.

Outline

- I. Thesis Statement:** *Though Petruchio employs several means of taming Kate, it is ultimately unclear how much success he enjoys.*
- II. Petruchio flatters Kate and uses reverse psychology to trick her into not only believing that he loves her, but also into being obedient to him.**
 - A. Flattery in the wooing scene.
 - B. Petruchio defends Kate’s image before the other men.
 - C. Before the wedding banquet, Petruchio defends Kate against the other men, who, he pretends, are trying to steal his bride from him.
- III. Petruchio physically forces Kate to accept him and to be obedient.**
 - A. He starves her on her wedding night.
 - B. He humiliates and thereby humbles Kate.
 1. Petruchio comes to his own wedding dressed in tatters.
 2. He denies Kate a fashionable dress and cap.
 3. Petruchio orders Kate to submit to him before the other husbands.
 - C. Petruchio will not let Kate have her way unless it accords with his plans.
 1. He will not leave his country home until Kate agrees with his pronouncements about the time of day.
 2. Petruchio vows to take Kate home on the day of Bianca’s wedding banquet unless Kate gives him a kiss in public.
- IV. Petruchio plays psychological games with Kate in order to test her obedience.**
 - A. He ignores whatever she says if it does not agree with his desires.
 1. The wooing scene, alone and before the men
 2. The dress and cap
 - B. He tests her obedience.
 1. The time of day
 2. Vincentio as a maiden
 3. The public kiss before the banquet
- V. Petruchio only seems successful; many things suggest that he has, in fact, failed to tame Kate completely.**
 - A. If Petruchio only wanted outward displays of obedience and agreement, then he has successfully tamed Kate. Kate finally does what he says and agrees with him on several things that are notably false.
 1. She agrees that the moon shines during the day.
 2. She kisses him in public twice.
 3. She pretends that Vincentio is a maiden.
 4. At the play’s end, she comes to Petruchio and brings out the other wives from the parlor.
 5. She recites a hyperbolic speech about a wife’s obedience to her husband.

- B. Gestures do not indicate mental states; therefore, one can never know whether Kate accepts Petruchio wholeheartedly.
 - C. Kate's speech at the play's end seems over-performed. She is probably play acting for Petruchio here as she did before Vincentio.
 - D. Kate is really a boy; taming him is beside the point.
- VI. Conclusion:** By means of physical coercion, flattery, and trickery, Petruchio manages to force Kate into outward submission. But Kate's true feelings are still unclear to the audience. Thus, Petruchio's victory over Kate remains questionable.

TOPIC #3

The Taming of the Shrew seems to make a case for male supremacy. But at times this bid for the naturalness of male dominance is overplayed hyperbolic, and treated comically of Shakespeare. Consider the instances of chauvinism in the play and reflect upon the ways in which this play portrays maleness and supremacy.

Outline

- I. Thesis Statement:** *While The Taming of the Shrew includes many scenes of barbaric injustice toward women, the play's overall attitude toward male dominance is both ironic and comic.*
- II. Instances of male dominance in this play are exaggerated and should not be taken seriously. These instances suggest that chauvinism is pure performance, not instinctive.**
 - A. Petruchio's humiliation of Kate is unrealistic.
 - 1. Starving Kate and depriving her of sleep goes too far.
 - 2. Petruchio's humiliation of Kate on her wedding day, coupled with his insistence that Vincentio is a maiden and that the moon shines during the day, all challenge the audience's ability to believe in Petruchio's own sincerity.
 - B. The hyperbolic intensity of Kate's speech about a wife's subservience to her husband undermines her credibility.
 - C. Just as the many disguises in this play point to the possibility of appearances being false, acts of chauvinism begin to look like acts of deception.
 - D. The Induction uses the subplot of the Lord deceiving Christopher Sly in order to alert the audience to the art of deception practiced by those in powerful positions.
- III. Irony sabotages the audience's view of male supremacy.**
 - A. The Petrarchism of Petruchio's wooing speeches points up the extent to which he relies upon others for his approach and is indeed acting a part. Masculinity here seems more performed than natural. The fact that Petruchio calls Hortensio and Lucentio "novices" points up the skill (or artifice) he employs.
 - B. Grumio's imitation of Petruchio reflects badly upon Petruchio insofar as it will occur to the audience that Petruchio himself had been acting.
 - C. The crossdressing in original performances, and in some revivals, completely undermines the notion that sexual attraction is naturally inclined. This uncertainty, in turn, allows the audience to question the naturalness of male dominance.
 - 1. Sly falls for Bartholomew, dressed as a woman.
 - 2. Petruchio signals his knowledge that Kate is really a boy.
 - 3. The fact that only boys can portray women on stage may suggest that men are more innately female than women. If true, the claim that men are superior to women becomes entangled in the question of what maleness truly is.
- IV. Conclusion:** *The Taming of the Shrew's* highly ironic view of male supremacy suggests that male dominance is an act, and that there is nothing natural about it. Those who believe in it, therefore, are merely fooling themselves.