

English A Language and Literature

From shrew to feminist rebel: The evolution of gender roles, societal expectations, and feminist ideals

A Category 3 Extended Essay

Research question: How does *10 Things I Hate About You*, based on *The Taming of the Shrew*, depict the evolution of gender roles, societal expectations, and feminist ideals, and what do the portrayals in these works reveal about the societies in which they were created?

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Introduction

The Taming of the shrew by William Shakespeare is a comedic play which explores the dynamics of gender roles and societal expectations in Elizabethan England¹. The play follows the daughter of a lord in Padua, Katherina, a strong-willed woman who's often depicted as a 'shrew', and her suitor of marriage Petruchio from Verona, whose mission is to "tame the beast" into submission. Katherina's father refuses to let his younger daughter, Bianca, marry until her elder sister is wed, but Kate is infamous for her sharp tongue and deterring suitors. Ultimately, Kate submits to her husband, and the play ends with her well-known monologue in which she stresses the importance of obeying one's husband. The play highlights the prevalent patriarchal values of Shakespeare's time, where women were expected to be obedient, chaste, and meek.

10 Things I Hate About You is a modern adaptation of the Shakespeare play set in the American High School, Padua High, at the end of the 1990s². The film follows the Stratford sisters, Kat and Bianca, and their romantic lives, or the lack thereof, due to their father's strict rules. Bianca is not allowed to date until Kat does, a rule their father has set in place, knowing Kat has no interest in dating. In the opening scene with Kat, she immediately comes across as a disruptor. She is playing loud music in her car with the windows rolled down, and the lyrics: "I don't give a damn about my reputation"³ – establish the tone for her character. Patrick, who was initially paid by Bianca's suitors to date Kat, eventually earns her trust, and Kat embraces a romantic relationship with him despite having a hard stance against conforming to societal

¹ Shakespeare, 2016

² Junger, 1999

³ Blackheartrec, 2010

expectations. *10 Things* contrasts *the Shrew* by emphasising modern feminist ideals and highlighting the importance of personal autonomy.

The Elizabethan society was deeply patriarchal⁴. The strict expectations of women included the embodiment of silence and obedience, in addition to conforming to strict societal norms which limited both their freedom and autonomy. The context of Shakespeare and his plays are crucial for understanding the dynamics in *The Taming of the Shrew*, where the “taming” of Katherina is seen as a necessary transformation to fit societal expectations.

In contrast, the modern 90’s setting of *10 Things I Hate About You* reflects a post-feminist generation where women are progressively challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for equality, independence, and autonomy⁵. This period saw significant shifts in social attitudes towards gender, which were influenced by the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

This analysis employs feminist literary theory to compare the two texts. Feminist Perspectives in Literature and Cinema examine how works reflect societal values through feminist literary criticism⁶. This approach uncovers hidden narratives and highlights the evolution of feminist thought. For instance, analysing *10 Things* alongside its originator *the Shrew* through the method of feminist analysis may reveal insights into gender norms, character transformations, and feminist themes.

⁴ Öcal, 2023

⁵ Weber, 2010

⁶ Faith and Lizy, 2024

Thus, how does *10 Things I Hate About You*, based on *The Taming of the Shrew*, depict the evolution of gender roles, societal expectations, and feminist ideals, and what do the portrayals in these works reveal about the societies in which they were created?

Gender roles in romantic relationships

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katherina's father, Baptista Minola, likens the act of marrying off his daughters to a merchant selling his goods, thus treating marriage as a commercial transaction in which women are the commodity. This is evident in his declaration.

“Faith, gentlemen, now I play a merchant’s part [...]”⁷

This line highlights both Baptista's and many other men of this time's view of daughters as items to be traded for both social and financial gain. Women's role in marriage was simply to act as the item of trade. This characterises Katherina and Petruchio's engagement as an arrangement between two men: one buying and one selling. As the woman and object of trade, Kate is not considered, and neither are her wishes nor her consent. Baptista's approach reflects the broader societal norms of the Elizabethan era, where marriages were often viewed as a means to consolidate wealth and power rather than for love.

Petruchio's financial motives to marry Katherina, based entirely on her sizable dowry, further underscores this transactional nature of romantic relationships.

“[...] And therefore if thou know

One rich enough to be Petruchio's wife –

⁷ Shakespeare, 2016, 51

As wealth is burden of my wooing dance [...]
 I come to wive it wealthily in Padua –
 If wealthily, then happily in Padua.”⁸

Petruchio’s primary interest in Katherina is revealed to be her dowry rather than her as a person. Here, Petruchio demonstrates a non-romantic understanding of marriage, a symptom of the social norms of the time. This quote exhibits how he views marriage simply as a key to wealth, as well as underscores the Elizabethan attitudes towards romantic unions, where financial considerations often outweighed personal compatibility.

Katherina’s outward resistance to this commodification contrasts sharply with her foil, her sister Bianca’s, compliance⁹. Bianca is portrayed as the obedient, ideal woman juxtaposed with Katherina’s rebellious nature.

“[...] For in Baptista’s keep my treasure is.
 He hath the jewel of my life in hold,
 His youngest daughter, beautiful Bianca [...]”¹⁰

Hortensio’s choice of words is crucial, as he refers to Bianca as a ‘treasure’, implying that she is one of Baptista’s expensive possessions that Hortensio and many other men wish to own. Here, Bianca is commodified in a similar way to her sister, as Hortensio’s line reiterates that Bianca can be sold in an identical way as an inanimate object. What creates the dichotomy between the two sisters, however, is that while Kate chooses not to conform to the male expectations of women’s role in society and romantic relationships, Bianca chooses to obey,

⁸ Shakespeare, 2016, 27-28

⁹ Zhang, 2021

¹⁰ Shakespeare, 2015, 29

aligning with the idea of the submissive and desirable wife. This is what ultimately makes the men of the play depict Katherina as a shrew and Bianca as the embodiment of the perfect woman. Despite Kate's inner strength, rebellion, and desire for independence, she ends up with the same fate as Bianca: objectified, dehumanised, and pressured into her eventual taming. This illustrates the limited roles available to the women of this period as well as the pressure placed on them to conform to patriarchal norms despite their efforts to break free of the gender roles placed on them.

In contrast, *10 Things I Hate About You* presents a more modern idea of relationships and dating or courtship. Patrick's more respectful and kind treatment of Kat to gain her trust stands in stark contrast to Petruchio's manipulative tactics of gaslighting, isolating, humiliating, and starving his wife to make her obedient. Patrick's character arc highlights his transformation from being motivated by money to developing a genuine romantic interest, emphasising the theme of love. In contrast, Petruchio's character in the play does not undergo this transformation; he sees Katherina solely as a means to achieve greater wealth, lacking any romantic feelings for her. This change in the adaptation reflects a shift towards valuing mutual respect and equality in relationships. The portrayal of consent in the film is also noteworthy, as the male love interest gains Kat's trust by communicating with her and respecting her boundaries throughout their relationship, although in a witty manner through their banter. An example of this is when Patrick invites Kat to a party.

Patrick: "Come to Bogey's party with me."

Kat: "You never give up, do you?"

Patrick: "Was that a yes?"

Kat: "No."

Patrick: "Well, then, was that a no?"

Kat: "No."

Patrick: "I'll see you at 9:30 then."¹¹

At Bogey's party, Kat becomes quite intoxicated and ends up dancing on and falling off a table, hitting her head on the chandelier. Patrick comes to her aid, and when Kat tries to kiss him, he gently declines, as he does not want to take advantage of her while she is in a vulnerable state due to her inebriation. This moment exhibits Patrick's respect for Kat and her consent, revealing his genuine feelings for her. Patrick gains Kat's trust and respect by communicating with her, sending a positive message to the film's viewers about consent and teen romance. The film critiques traditional gender roles in relationships by portraying romantic connections as partnerships rather than transactions. However, elements of traditional gender roles still appear in the modern adaptation, with the woman being pursued and the man taking on the role of the pursuer. The director emphasises this dynamic by framing this particular scene with Kat walking away while Patrick continues to pursue her. Ultimately, the respectful manner in which Patrick courts Kat forms the foundation of their relationship, which highlights a modern shift towards more egalitarian partnerships.

The Prom in *10 Things* serves as a symbolic modern equivalent of matrimony, as it represents a significant social ritual. The director establishes Kat's disdain for prom right from the start. The first scene cuts from a wide shot of Padua High, which serves as the viewers' first introduction to the school, to Kat tearing down a poster¹². The camera moves to capture the reactions of those putting up the posters while Kat's theme song, "I don't give a damn about my bad reputation," continues to play.

¹¹ Junger, 1999, 38:21

¹² Junger, 1999, 1:49



In a conversation with her friend Mandella, Kat, after tearing down another poster, finds herself in a scene reminiscent of the earlier moment when she ripped down a poster featuring the same girl¹³. Once again, the *mise en scène* consists of the same girl reacting, but also Kat remaining indifferent to her.



Kat: “Can you even imagine?

Who would go to that antiquated mating ritual.”

Mandella: “I would, but I don’t have a date.”¹⁴

Kat’s ultimate decision to attend prom despite her initial critiques, wearing her absent mother’s pearls, symbolises her reconciliation of independence with societal traditions¹⁵. Traditional symbolism associated with pearls includes concepts such as innocence, purity, beauty, and grace – qualities often linked to the desirable character Bianca by the men in the film, but not to the ‘shrewish’ Kat. While these traits are generally applied to Bianca, it is ultimately Kat

¹³ Junger, 1999, 58:39

¹⁴ Junger, 1999, 58:40

¹⁵ Junger, 1999, 1:20:10

who ends up wearing the pearls. This choice underscores her resistance to societal expectations surrounding gender roles.



The prom is a pivotal moment where Kat balances her desire for autonomy with her willingness to participate in a communal tradition. This decision reflects a nuanced understanding of modern relationships, where Kat is willing to participate in what she once called an ‘antiquated mating ritual’ while balancing her independence. This event sharply contrasts with the transactional nature of relationships in *the Shrew*. The play portrays marriage, and therefore romantic relationships, as a means of economic and social advancement, while the film celebrates personal choice, consent, and mutual respect. Kat’s participation in prom, a modern social ritual, conveys her acceptance of societal norms without compromising her identity.

Feminism and individual agency

Katherina’s sharp tongue and witty personality in *The Taming of the Shrew* serve as her primary tools of resistance against societal norms, as depicted in her interactions with other characters.

Baptista: “[...] That is, not to bestow my youngest daughter

Before I have a husband for the elder [...]

Leave shall you have to court her at your pleasure”

Gremio: "To cart her rather, she's too rough for me [...]"

Kate: "I pray you, sir, is it your will

To make a stale of me amongst these mates?"

Hortensio: "...No mates for you

Unless you were of gentler, milder mold."

[...]

Hortensio: "From all such devils, good Lord deliver us."

Tranio: "[...] That wench is stark mad or wonderful froward."¹⁶

During this exchange, Katherina's hand in marriage is offered to the characters Gremio and Hortensio. Gremio immediately refuses due to Kate's bitter disposition, which he and the other men in the text view as unladylike. Shakespeare, through Gremio's pun, establishes how Kate is undesirable due to her refusing to subscribe to socially enforced behaviours. Gremio puns on the word "court," saying he would rather "cart" Kate than enter a courtship with her. This is a reference to the Elizabethan practice of tying disorderly women to a cart and parading them through the streets for public humiliation.¹⁷ Hortensio, too, refuses to court Katherina, revealing how he's uninterested because she does not behave in the gentle manner that was expected of young women of this time, referring to her as a devil. This piece of dialogue is a crucial moment in this play, as Kate's refusal to conform makes her an outcast. This is also the first of many times in which a male character tells her she is not behaving the way a woman is supposed to and expected to behave. The dynamic displayed during this exchange challenges the traditional roles assigned to women as well as critiquing the limited avenues available for female expression.

¹⁶ Shakespeare, 2016, 17

¹⁷ Isabelleh, 2020

Katherine's final monologue, in which she declares, "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper," has sparked much debate regarding its interpretation. Some interpret her speech as a display of a transformation in her views on marriage and men and a genuine submission as she characterises women as the weaker sex and urges all women to submit to their husbands. Others believe she delivers the speech ironically and can be viewed as a calculated act of rebellion. The importance of the two contrasting interpretations is crucial as they reveal whether Katherina has been successfully tamed or not.

"[...] Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee
 And for thy maintenance; commits his body
 To painful labor [...]
 Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe; [...]
 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;
 And when she is [...]
 not obedient to his honest will,
 What is she but a foul contending rebel
 And graceless traitor to her loving lord?
 I am ashamed that women are so simple
 To offer war where they should kneel for peace,
 Or seek for rule, supremacy, and sway,
 When they are bound to serve, love, and obey [...]"¹⁸

She compares husbands to authority figures, explaining that every woman should afford her husband the same obedience and respect a subject would afford its royal sovereign. This speech

¹⁸ Shakespeare, 2016, 111-112

can be interpreted as Kate's strategic choice to play the role expected of her, thus gaining some form of control within the constraints of the society she lives in. This interpretation aligns with the play's broader theme of the performative nature of social roles. The ambiguity of Katherina's submission is central to understanding her character. Her implied compliance may mask an inner defiance, suggesting that her outward submission is a performance rather than a true change of heart.

In *10 Things I Hate About You*, Kat Stratford embodies a stance of modern feminism by asserting her individuality and rejecting societal norms. Her defiance is evident in her declaration of her school of choice.

Mr. Stratford: "Are you punishing me because

I want you to stay close to home?"

Kat: "Aren't you punishing me because mom left?

[...]

"Stop making my decisions for me."

Mr. Stratford: "I am your father. That is my right."

Kat: "So what I want doesn't matter?"

Mr. Stratford: "You're 18, you don't know what you want. [...]"

Kat: "I want to go to an East Coast school.

I want you to trust me to make my own choices,

and I want you to stop trying to control my life

just because you can't control yours!¹⁹

¹⁹ Junger, 1999, 27:17



Contradicting her Shakespearean counterpart, Kat does not allow her father to make decisions on her behalf. This scene effectively conveys her frustration with her father's attempts to make choices for her through various directorial choices, despite maintaining an eye-level perspective throughout²⁰. Initially, her father is standing above her, looking down on her, which emphasises his role as an authority figure. Meanwhile, she is seated on the couch and appears to be "berated" like a child, suggesting that her father still views her as incapable of making her own decisions. However, when she stands up, she rises to his level, symbolising her frustration and asserting that he has no true authority over her autonomy. In the play, male characters such as Baptista and Petruchio hold authority and make decisions affecting the female characters, who are expected to be obedient and dependent on men. In the film, Kat challenges the notion that her father or any other male character can dictate her life choices, asserting her independence within her cultural context, which underscores the thematic significance of feminism.

The pearls in "*10 Things*" carry significant symbolic weight throughout the story. Bianca's initial use of the pearls reflects her detachment from her mother and her legacy, as well as her desire to be liked.

²⁰ Junger, 1999, 27:20

Bianca: “Why don’t you try being nice?

People wouldn’t know what to think.”

Kat: “You forget, I don’t care what people think.”

[...]

Kat: “You don’t always have to be who they want you to be [...]

Bianca: “I happen to like being adored [...]

Kat: “Where’d you get the pearls?”

Bianca: “They’re Mom’s”

[...]

Kat: “So you’re just gonna start wearing them now?”

Bianca: “It’s not like she’s coming back to claim them!”²¹

This moment in the film highlights the absence of a maternal figure, which may have complicated the sisters’ relationships with each other and their father, leading to his overprotective nature. Bianca’s choice to wear the pearls, due to the traits traditionally associated with pearls, such as beauty and purity – qualities that men desire in her – emphasises Bianca’s longing to be “adored”. She quickly dismisses her older sister’s advice to be herself, unable to comprehend her sister’s indifference to others’ opinions. The *mise en scène*, featuring Bianca brushing her hair in the mirror while dressed in white – another symbolic representation of her beauty and purity – and wearing her mother’s pearls, along with her quote about enjoying “being adored,” underscores Bianca’s search for validation through her appearance, hence the focus on beauty.

²¹ Junger, 1999, 25:17



However, Kat wearing the pearls to prom can be interpreted as a symbol of her reconciliation with her family's past, the departure of her mother, and her emotional growth. The pearls represent a bridging of past and present, as they are a connection to her mother. The act of wearing her mother's pearls signifies Kat's ability to balance personal agency with familial bonds, embodying a more nuanced interpretation of feminist empowerment.

Kat's journey in the film can be interpreted as a metaphoric journey for the evolution from second-wave to third-wave feminism²². Her initial stance is reminiscent of second-wave feminism, as it is characterised by the rejection of traditional roles and a focus on independence. As the story progresses, Kat's character evolves to embrace the ideals of third-wave feminism, which emphasises the balance between agency and connection, as well as intersectionality. Kat's capability to maintain her independence while forming meaningful relationships reflects the third-wave emphasis on the assimilation of personal and collective empowerment.

Societal expectations and cultural context

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Katherina's ultimate, and perhaps inevitable, "taming" is a reflection of Elizabethan ideals of female obedience and submission. The aforementioned

²² Clement, 2023

view of women as commodities values women primarily for their ability to secure advantageous marriages. Katherina's initial resistance to these norms underscores her struggle against a patriarchal society that seeks to control women. Her foil, on the other hand, embodies the ideal conformist woman of the time. Bianca is obedient, compliant, and demure, making her the preferred daughter and a more desirable "treasure" for suitors. Her behaviour aligns with the societal expectations of this era. The dynamic between the sisters serves as a picture of the pressure put on women to conform to specific roles and the consequences of defiance.

In *10 Things I Hate About You*, high school social dynamics mirror the societal expectations similar to the ones depicted in Shakespeare's play. Bianca initially conforms to the role of a popular girl, adhering to the expectations of her peers and striving for social acceptance. Kat's defiance of high school cliques and her critique of prom as an "antiquated mating ritual" highlight her rejection of societal expectations. Bianca's character arc, including her going from conformity to self-assertion, reflects a modern critique of societal expectations. As she begins to break free of her role as a popular girl and her father's overprotective rules, as well as making independent choices and asserting her desires, Bianca mirrors the feminist ideals of personal agency and empowerment. This evolution emphasises the film's message about how self-worth comes from within rather than from societal validation.

In *the Shrew*, Shakespeare uses satire to critique societal norms through exaggeration, such as the literal taming of Katherina and the portrayal of Bianca as a "treasure". The level of irony present in the depiction of Kate's transformation from a headstrong woman to a seemingly obedient wife makes one question the authenticity of her submission. This satirical approach reveals the absurdity of the rigid gender roles inflicted by society. These norms are further critiqued by Bianca's portrayal. Her desirability and compliance, contrasted with Kate's

resistance, highlight the superficiality of their society's values. Shakespeare uses these characters to challenge the audience's perceptions of gender and obedience with the employment of comedy, encouraging a more critical view of the societal expectations of his time.

The sibling dynamics present between Kat and Bianca in *10 Things* reflect broader societal expectations, in addition to feminist ideals. Kat's initial disdain for societal norms contrasted with Bianca's conformity creates tension between them. As both characters go through their own journeys and grow, they start to understand and support each other's choices. This reconciliation could be symbolised by the idea or assumption that Bianca gave Kat their mother's pearls to wear to prom after their character development. This gesture represents the balance between independence and harmonious relationships, which is a key concept of modern feminist thought. The film's nuanced approach to feminism is demonstrated through Bianca's eventual defence of her agency and Kat's acceptance of societal traditions, such as attending prom. Their growth indicates the importance of respecting individual choices while also challenging restrictive norms. This dynamic highlights the film's message of empowerment.

Conclusion

10 Things I Hate About You, based on *The Taming of the Shrew*, depicts the evolution of gender roles and societal expectations, underscoring significant cultural shifts between their respective eras. The Shakespearean play, written during the Elizabethan era, reflects the rigid and patriarchal norms of its time, where women were viewed as property and their roles were confined to domesticity. In contrast, the 1999 film adaptation presents a modern take on these themes, portraying a progressive view of gender roles. The film's characters are navigating a

world in which women have greater autonomy and are encouraged to assert their independence. This reflects the cultural shift towards gender equality and empowerment that has occurred over the centuries.

Both works critique patriarchal structures, albeit in different methods. *the Shrew* uses satire to expose and challenge the absurdity of traditional gender norms. Through the character of Katherina, Shakespeare emphasises the oppressive nature of these norms and the societal expectation for women to be submissive. Kate's seemingly being "tamed" in the play's controversial ending has sparked much debate about its true message. On the other hand, *10 Things* incorporates feminist ideals more explicitly. Kat Stratford embodies modern feminist values, challenging expectations placed upon her by society as well as asserting her right to autonomy. The film portrays her journey towards empowerment and self-acceptance, offering a critique of the lingering patriarchal attitudes in our modern society.

Adaptation is vital for keeping classic literature relevant and promoting discussions on gender and societal norms. *10 Things I Hate About You* reinterprets *The Taming of the Shrew* for a contemporary audience, preserving its themes while allowing for new interpretations that resonate with modern values. Such adaptations encourage meaningful conversations about societal progress and the ongoing struggle for gender equality.

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