

The Winter's tale Assessment



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Essay

The central theme of this play and Leontes' character is jealousy and its two fuelling forces - insecurity and ego. In the first half of the play, Leontes is overwhelmed with groundless suspicions and jealousy about a graceful person who loves him and is fully devoted to his life and happiness. However, Leontes is so blinded by his self-deception and probably rage that originates from his fierce jealousy that he even ignores the advice of everyone around him leading to his destruction. Shakespeare also employs negatively connotative language and uses the reactions of other characters to highlight Leontes' self-manifested jealousy.

The arc of this character represents how destructive the force of jealousy can be. It also shows that how a small flicker of doubt when fanned with constant jealousy can grow into a raging flame that devours everything. In the play, after witnessing a small innocent act of Queen Hermione holding the hand of King Polixenes, the readers are introduced to Leontes' jealousy as he says 'Too hot, Too hot! I have tremor cordis on me: my heart dances, But not for joy, not joy'. The repetition of not joy emphasises Leontes' dismay and jealousy. This one act is enough for Leontes to start doubting his loving wife and enter this vicious cycle of jealousy. Leontes speech, consisting of frequent pauses, shows the reader the effect of jealousy on his emotional state as he is unable to express his thoughts clearly and succinctly, as a king should do.

Shakespeare also hints, though not explicitly, at an underlying insecurity in Leontes' mind that allows this small doubt to grow into full blown jealousy. It is a weak insecure mind that allows small thoughts to fester into wounds. Specifically, Shakespeare uses his dialogue to effectively convey the jealousy of the male heart. Leontes uses derogatory remarks and abrasive language and addresses Hermione as 'an adultress' and a 'bed-swever' in front of the entire court, and abandons his courtesy and eloquent language. This change in Leontes' speech and conduct conveys to the reader how jealousy can cloud one's judgment and sense of conduct. In a modern context, one can also interpret this as the male desire to see women purely from the perspective of the male ownership and without any independent agency.

Leontes' desire to take immediate revenge on King Polixenes is also a signal of his ego. The strong male ego, potentially even more pronounced in a king, leads him to immediately order poisoning of his best friend since childhood and a strong king of another kingdom to boot. These twin forces of insecurity and ego fuel the jealousy and make him immune to all reason. The readers also see the extent of Leontes' jealousy as he begins to question the paternity of his child Mamillius as seen in 'Art thou my boy?' This also shows the threat that an illegitimate child pose to Leontes' kingdom. After the birth of Perdita, Leontes refuses to accept she is his child, even though Perdita takes after him as depicted in 'Behold, my lords, Although the print be little, the whole matter and copy of the father'. Leontes even denies the result of the trial, written by Dion himself, a religious advisor he places trust in. The officer reads out the result which labels Leontes as a 'jealous tyrant' and

Hermione as 'chaste'. All these events show the reader Leontes' irrationality as he is unable to be persuaded by even pure reason.

As the play moves, Shakespeare shows how the fire of jealousy consumes everything that the person touches. Leontes loses all his loved ones - his wife, his two children - Mamilius and Perdita, and his best friend, before he comes to his senses. This perhaps indicates that only true loss can shock a person back to his senses.

In the journey of Leontes, we also see how he is unable to hear any voice of rationality. Starting with his friends and advisors in the court and ultimately Gods themselves fail to change his mind. Shakespeare uses the reactions of different characters to underline the ferocity and absurdity of Leontes' behaviour under the spell of jealousy. In the play, Camillo, who despite being his loyal servant, is shocked at Leontes' request and strongly disagrees with the suggested course of action as seen in 'Good my lord, be cured of this diseased opinion, and betimes; For 'tis most dangerous'. Camillo describes jealousy as a disease that is infecting Leontes and consuming him.

In the second half of the play, Leontes shows the readers how emotional shock can lead to recognition of one's mistakes leading to repentance and some redemption. But this redemption is not complete. He gets his wife and daughter back but loses his son for ever. Repentance can lead to redemption but human follies always leave behind dark marks. The vile forces of human nature, when left unchecked, can consume the best and strongest of us all. The events show the readers how illogical Leontes' jealousy was and helps illustrate how jealousy can paralyse an individual's sense of judgement and helps develop the themes of madness, delusion, self-deception and most importantly, jealousy.