

‘The way a contemporary composer transforms an older text inevitably reflects the way that values in society have changed over time’

When an older text is adapted to cater for contemporary audiences, elements of the text are inevitably changed. Such is the case with Taming of the Shrew (ToTS), a play by William Shakespeare, and its modern counterpart, the film 10 Things I Hate About You (10 Things), directed by Gil Junger. The 1590 play centres on two sisters in Padua, Italy, and how they are wooed and changed by marriage, while the 1999 film instead takes place in a US high school. The sister Katherina, or Kat, is bold and behaves against what is expected, while Bianca is instead the picture of pure femininity. Both texts demonstrate how particular social expectations are valued in their contexts and how gender roles and independence develop. The texts are similar in their overall structure, but scenes have indubitably changed to reflect society’s shifting of values over time. Through Shakespearean adaptations, younger audiences are able to understand the prevalence and change of particular societal values and how these values affect interpersonal relationships. Similes, symbolism, possessive language, and other literary and cinematic techniques allow these topics to be explored deeply.

Both ToTS and 10 Things explore the everlasting social hierarchy and its aspects. Wealth and conformity to inane social values affects a person's preconceived worth, even in vastly different contexts. Often these social values are intertwined with gender roles, as is displayed in both ToTS and 10 Things. Women in ToTS were merely commodities that allowed for money to be made. Petruchio is aware that status is very important in society, and proclaims early in the play, “Thou know’st not gold’s effect. Tell me her father’s name, and ’tis enough; For I will board her, though she chide as loud As thunder when the clouds in autumn crack.” He does not care how his wife behaves, as long as she has enough money to sustain him and keep him high in society. This is demonstrated by his use of a simile, comparing the loud yells of his potential wife to that of thunder cracks. He understands that behaviour often does not matter, only wealth and prominence. Comparatively, Joey Donner in 10 Things is already the wealthy and popular archetype. He is rude and demeaning but is kept in high stature because of the wealth and appearance he displays. His attitude and status are symbolised by his loud, expensive red convertible that he regularly uses to pick up girls. The car he drives is only accessible because of his wealth, and the shiny red colour epitomises his flashy appearance. When chasing after Bianca, Joey claims, “Money I have. This I’m doing for fun.” Petruchio and Joey are two sides of the same coin, displaying the typical wants of a male figure in society. Their views demonstrate the general patriarchal perception of women as something to use for their own means. Instead of the presence of nobility and marrying up, the concept of social hierarchy is expressed through high school popularity and demonstrations of wealth. The social hierarchy and what is perceived as acceptable behaviour throughout time is relevant to contemporary society. People today still place different values on others dependent on their outside appearance and affluence. Through these symbolic devices, audiences can see that particular characters are largely unlikeable and arrogant, but because of what their wealth can do they remain important. These techniques show that the concept of popularity and class has remained similar throughout time.

Even though the idea of a demure woman is still sought after; women in 10 Things have much more agency and freedom than those in ToTS. Women are expected to act in particular ways in both contexts, but what is deemed as acceptable is very different, and audiences understand the reasoning behind this shift. In ToTS, Katherina and Bianca are expected to marry whomever their father chooses and be subservient to their husbands. After Petruchio and Katherina are married Petruchio claims, "I will be master of what is mine own. She is my goods, my chattels...". His use of possessive language shows that Katherina has no autonomy over her own actions and life. He also compares her to objects, showing that he does not see her as a person but as a commodity for his use. When he talks of her in this way, no characters object, as these gender roles are acceptable to those around them. Women could not live as they wanted. Kat and Bianca in 10 Things are instead free to act as they wish and explore their own interests. They are shown to have lives outside of male attraction and have spaces they are accepted. Kat does not like to be told what to do and prefers living on her own terms. This is shown even in the first scene when Kat pulls up in her rundown car beside laughing, bubbly teens in a convertible. Music is used to further define their styles and beliefs. The girls in the convertible are playing an upbeat song and dancing along, but when Kat pulls up 'Bad Reputation' by Joan Jett quickly smothers them and stops their dancing. There is a direct juxtaposition between the characters, showing that Kat decidedly lives by her own rules, and no one can stop her. Kat having her own car further showcases her autonomy and her music choice reveals that she is not the only one who rebels against societal norms; she has a space to explore her independence. This concept is very different to the roles and expectations of women in ToTS and general Shakespearean society. Any woman who went against social norms was shunned and punished harshly. The concept of womanly obedience was removed as it doesn't truly reflect how women are valued in contemporary society. This idea is still relevant, however, as Kat is still demonised for having her own interests beyond what is commonly accepted, as exhibited by the teens reaction to seeing her. But she is not forced to conform, demonstrating that the attitudes towards women and their independence have changed.

In conclusion, it can be seen that Shakespearean adaptations are important for younger audiences to understand the shifting of society. Through symbolism and similes, the idea of popularity and the borders of the social hierarchy are clearly discussed in both texts. Petruchio and Joey Donner are aware of money's effects in regard to social standing, and they demonstrate that societal values have remained similar throughout time. Possessive language in ToTS tells of the restricted position of women at that time, while the juxtaposition between Kat and other teens in 10 Things identifies the value she places on her independence, and the difference in how others react to an independent woman. The music choice allows audiences to understand that Kat does have an accepted place in society, while the independent women in ToTS did not. These two texts are able to showcase what is valued and expected by society, and that conforming to that may not always be what is best.

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