Inexcusable Acts In Literature Essay, Research Paper

Throughout many great works of literature there are numerous characters whose acts are either moral or immoral. In the works Euripides “Medea”, Shakespeare’s “Othello” and Boccaccio’s Decameron, “Tenth Day, Tenth Story”, the main characters all carry out actions which in today’s day and age would be immoral and inexcusable. Medea takes on the most immoral act, in Euripides great tragic work.

The morale of today varies greatly with that of the time periods in which these works were written. Gualtieri from Boccaccio’s work, Othello from Shakespeare’s work and Medea from Euripides’ work were all, for the most part, just in their actions because of the view of the citizens during their time period. These people played an immense part in what was viewed as right and wrong, just as in today’s day.

In Boccaccio’s Decameron, “Tenth Day, Tenth Story”, the main character, Gualtieri wants to test his new wife to see how loyal she is to him. In the beginning of the play, it is portrayed to the readers that Gualtieri is a very well respected, moral man. After being told that it is nessecary to find a wife, Gualtieri states, “I will do as you request and so shall I have only myself to blame if things turn out badly, I want to be the one who chooses her, and I tell you now that if she is not honored by you as your lady…you will learn to your displeasure how serious a matter it was to compel me with your requests…” (Boccaccio 135).

From this statement Gualtieri is portrayed as a compassionate man. He says he will blame no one but himself if things do not work out and once his wife is chosen he orders his people to respect her, no matter what. This is ironic for him to say, due to the actions he takes later in the story. As the play proceeds Gualtieri’s actions become more inexcusable and immoral. He “wished to test his new wife’s patience” to see if she truly was as loyal a wife as she seemed to be. He first insulted her with “harsh words”, than told her the child that she bore was not good enough because it was not a male. In turn, Gualtieri ordered his wife to give him the child to be killed, to this his wife obeys. His plan, the whole time, was not to kill the child but to send her “to one of his relatives in Bologna” to be raised and educated. When the next child came, Gualtieri took the same monstrous act. The last scheme to his plan was to tell his poor wife that he no longer wished to be married t! o her and planned on marrying “one of the counts of Panago” and wished for Griselda, his wife, to be present, she did as asked. At the “wedding” Gualtieri announced that the young girl he planned on marrying was in fact his daughter, he sent away many years ago. He tells Griselda that he only wanted “to teach her how to be a good wife and show his people how to choose and keep a wife.” To this, “Gualtieri was judged as one of the wisest men” (142) by the people of the land.

The actions Gualtieri took were very harsh, in the current views of our time and even of his time. When he pretended to murder his children and take a new wife “his subjects criticized him bitterly and regarded him as a cruel man.” Once he revealed his plan though, he was thought of in the highest manner, as the wisest of all men. Therefore, Gualtieri, was viewed as moral in the first moments of the story, performed these horrid acts, and his people still felt the same way towards him at the end of the story. His actions were accepted and even honored by his people.

In today’s world Gualtieri’s misdeeds would be viewed as immoral sins. Pride is what caused him to do these retched things. Pride, one of the seven deadly sins, is the “wanting to elevate oneself above others”. Gualtieri wanted to show his wife that he had power over her and that he was still higher than her in social status. Although the actions taken by Gualtieri were immoral, they do not compare to the sins of Othello and Medea.

Othello by nature was a very courageous, open, generous, heroic, unsuspecting-naïve man. Iago was the main cause in Othello’s fall in Shakespeare’s tragic play. Iago, Othello’s close friend, wants revenge on him for not promoting Iago to a higher position instead it is given to another man, Michael Cassio, “Three great ones of the city, in personal suit to make me his lieutenant, Off-capped to him and, by the faith of man, I know my price I am worth no worse a place. But he, as loving his own pride and purposes, Evades them with a bombast circumstance, Horribly stuffed with epithets of war Nonsuits my mediators. For, “Certes,” says he, “I have already chose my officer.” And what was he? Forsooth, a great a great arithmetician, one Michael Cassio, a Florentine.” (Shakespeare 1.1.7-17)

Iago’s devious plan begins at this moment. He plans on tricking Othello into thinking that Cassio is having an affair with his wife, Desdemona. This plan will work because Othello believes Iago to be a very honest man. He is not the only one is the play who is tricked by Iago’s fraud. Everyone repeatedly asserts the belief that Iago is honorable. Roderigo states to Iago, “That thou Iago, who hadst my purse, as if strings were thine, shouldst know of this.” (1.1.2-3). Later in the play Othello also states, “A man of his honesty and trust” (1.3.275) of Iago, then ten lines later he speaks again of him, addressing him as “honest Iago.” Therefore, all the characters in the play do not see through Iagos plan until it is too late. What Iago attempts, and eventually achieves, is to put Othello under such stress that he breaks down. The play mainly focuses on the point of Iago turning the character of Othello into an untrusting, jealous, evil-hearted man. This transition is achieved w! hen Othello murders his own wife. He believes that if he cannot be perfect in his love, than he will be perfect in his vengeance. When he does take his revenge, Othello’s true being comes out one more time. This is shown when he states, before killing Desdemona, “Yet I’ll not shed her blood, nor scar that whether skin of hers than snow, and smooth as monumental alabaster.” (5.2.4-5). This statement shows that deep inside of him he wishes to do her no harm, it is only Iago’s twisted plan that is pushing him to kill her. After learning of her faithfulness though, Othello kills himself because of the wrong he has done. This act was not necessarily viewed as immoral, but heroic, in Othello’s time. He acts on inner necessity. He slays Desdemona because he cannot live with someone who was untrue. Othello has the obvious heroic qualities of courage and strength, yet also embraces jealousy and pride, two sins of today’s time, which would outweigh his strength and courage, changing him into a savage man. Jealousy in our time and also in Othello’s time rises from love. It is the fear of seeing ones possessions in the hands of another, whether it is animate or inanimate. Jealousy brings with it hate and revenge, such as in Othello’s case and the numerous cases of today’s world which we read in newspapers or view on television of the ultimate revenge taken upon someone they love. Every misdeed carried out, like Othello’s, is highly immoral and inexcusable in today’s day and age, yet vengeance was seen as the right way to deal with another’s infidelity.

The most inexcusable of all the wrongdoing of these characters was that of Medea. This main character in Euripides great tragic play, “Medea”, commits the most unspeakable crime that could ever be committed by a human being. Medea is the protagonist in the play, the tragic hero. As an outcast, Medea draws sympathy from her audience, the Chorus of Corinthian women, even though her plans range from deceitful to utterly repellent.

In the beginning of the play, the reader learns of the hardship that Medea has under gone, the unfaithfulness of her husband. The maid speaks, “For deserting his own children and my mistress, Jason has taken a royal wife to his bed, the daughter of the ruler of this land, Creon. (Euripides 1) To this Medea is already seeking revenge. The maid tells of how Medea “has turned from her children and does not like to see them” and how she is “afraid she may think of some awful thing, for her heart is violent.” (2) This in turn foreshadows what is to come. As the play goes on Medea’s plan gets more intricate and devious, “By exiling me, he (Creon) has given me this one day to stay here and in this I will make dead bodies of three of my enemies-father, daughter and my husband” (13). Medea is premeditating these murders, which only makes the actions taken, worse. After considering for a long period of time, she decides the best thing to do is to take the lives of her own children, the! most unthinkable, immoral, inexcusable crime. Medea goes on to murder the princess and her father than commits the ultimate crime, “As quickly as I may kill my children and start away from this land, and not by wasting time, to suffer my children, to be slain by another hand is less kindly to them…This must be so, then I, their mother, shall kill them.” (40). When her plan is complete, Medea escapes, with the bodies of her dead children to a land of safety, never to feel remorse for her actions.

These extreme acts taken by the main character are not only inexcusable, but also immoral even in her time. In Medea’s first speech to the Chorus of Corinthian women, she speaks of her own humiliation and plight. She goes on to call on their empathy as women to understand the wrongs done by her husband. She begs them to help her obtain her revenge on Jason, “If I can find some means of devise of any scheme to pay my husband back for what he has done to me-him and his father-in-law and the girl who married him-Just to keep silent…No other soul can hold so many thoughts of blood.” (9)

The chorus believes her taking revenge on her husband is suitable due to his acts, “This I will promise. You are in the right, Medea, in paying your husband back. I am not surprised at you for being sad.” (9). As the play goes on, and the chorus learns of her planned course of action, they try to deter her from committing these crimes, due to its immorality, “Since you have shared with us the knowledge of your plan, I both wish to help you and support the normal ways of mankind, and tell you not to do this thing.” (26). Medea feels this is the only way to instill revenge. “I can do no other thing” (26), she simply replies. Medea’s intention to slaughter her own children is horrifying, in present time and in her time, due to the natural maternal instinct, to protect their children, therefore, the murder of ones children is unnatural and highly inexcusable no matter what the circumstances. The main reason Medea inflicted all of this pain on Jason is because of her overwhelming sense of pride, “For it is not bearable to be mocked by enemies. So it must happen,” Medea continues to say “Let no one think of me a weak one, feeble-spirited, a stay-at-home, but rather just the opposite, one who can hurt my enemies and my friends for the lives of such persons are much remembered.” (26). Medea does not want to be known as a delicate person, but as a dominant woman. For this reason, she commits these three immoral acts.

The Decameron, “Tenth Day, Tenth Story”, “Othello” and “Medea” are all tragic works, with seemingly tragic heroes. All three “heroes”, Gualtieri, Othello, and Medea, hurt someone close to them in order to still retain their pride or end their jealousy towards another. Although many of the trivial standards of the present world are different than that of when the authors were writing, there are many substantial similarities, therefore judging a character based on only the morals of today would be unjust.