

Practice SAC Comparative analysis of texts

What do these two texts suggest about the nature of love and loyalty?

In Margaret Atwood's intricate novella *'The Penelopiad'* and Joanna Murray-Smith's series of six short monologues, the women who feature in these post-feminist era texts are united by the mutual theme of being 'women on the edge'. The ancient Greeks classified love into eight different types. The characters in both texts display varying levels of self-love, Pilautia in terms of their self-image and self-esteem and Agape, selfless and unconditional love and loyalty towards their offspring. With regards to loyalty, a double standard exists for constancy and infidelity of women and men and finally, some women are in a position where they display loyalty that is forced due to their commitments or social status.

The individuals of these texts possess varying degrees of Pilautia – ranging from self-loathing to proper pride and healthy self-love, or excessive selfishness. Bombshell's Meryl Louise-Davenport is a harried mother whose 'frenetic stream-of-consciousness' is reverberated by the frantic pace of her language and the constant repetition of demands such as 'I have to be punctual. I have to be punctual'. Her use of high modality language highlights the high expectations that she places herself so that her children will not be late to school. Additionally, she uses a litany of negative adjectives to paint herself as an inadequate mother. She labels herself as 'awful', 'disorganised' and a 'failure'. Her self-deprecating language is indicative of her lack of self-compassion as she harshly berates herself for struggling under the immense pressures of motherhood. Contrastingly, Penelope's cousin, Helen is somewhat narcissistic as she is aware of her 'divine beauty' and uses this beauty in order to woo men. She is described as vain and this is due to the many men who would gasp 'in awe of her'. Helen is portrayed as a self-loving character and her self-centred choices have disastrous consequences, including the onset of the Trojan War. Helen who was known to be the archetype of feminine beauty highlights the power of charm and attractiveness in the patriarchal society where women were valued purely based on their outward appearance. Likewise, the young Mary O'Donnell's self-esteem is also influenced by the praise that is sung about her. This is underscored as she claims that 'Mr Burbridge knows that (she is) the talent show', as a result she becomes self-assured that she is 'the talent' and 'much better' than the other talent show competitors. Although she is portrayed to be confident and assured this quickly transforms into frenzied anxiety and doubt when she feels that another contender challenges her status. Therefore, Atwood and Murray-Smith both suggest that an individual's self-image and sense of worth can oscillate between unfaltering confidence and stressed self-criticism.

The women who also act as maternal figures in these texts also exhibit Agape - a self-sacrificing and boundless love and light is shed on the true strength and complete devotion of maternal love. In *The Penelopiad*, Penelope warns her son, Telemachus to not 'embark on some foolhardy adventure in search for his father but he blatantly 'defied (her) parental authority' and carried out this 'daring escapade'. Penelope's beloved son has both challenged and disobeyed her and understandably, she is left in a state of emotional distress as she was 'crying and wailing' for the safe return of her son. Therefore, it is out of love that this devoted mother continues to hope that her son will be unharmed. Following this undoubtedly exhausting episode it is evident that she celebrates his return with loving arms and 'welcomed him with tears of joy'. Penelope, herself claims that her son's act of defiance was a direct 'insult' to her and yet she is able to forgive him for his disrespect and disobedience in joyously celebrating his return. Thus, a mother's steadfast and persistent love is exemplified in the manner in which Penelope deals with her son's insubordination and rebellion. Likewise, Zoe Struthers also exhibits a forgiving and eternal love for her daughter who continues to say fallacious things 'to *Entertainment Weekly* about (her)' with the purpose of ruining Zoe's public image. Despite her daughter's damaging actions she still professes her love for her daughter and willingness to 'accept her for who she is'. Correspondingly, Penelope is also willing to justify her son's actions 'as young men will' feel the need to 'assert their authority'. Therefore the strong sense of maternal love grants these women the ability to excuse their child's misdeeds by displaying compassion and understanding.

In these texts, light is shed on hegemonic masculinity that can be quite oppressing for women. In the masculine-dominated society of ancient Greece it is evident that there is hypocrisy in the expectations of loyalty. Women are expected to be obedient and remain faithful to their male-counterparts while it is less controversial and seems somewhat understandable for men to commit adultery. This is exemplified by the Odysseus who warns Penelope that if she were to act disloyally in betraying him would be '(chopping her) into little pieces' or 'hang(ing) (her)'. Therefore, this violent language indicates the consequences of the women committing adultery are grave. However, when Penelope describes the sexual interactions between Odysseus and Helen who 'bathed' and 'anointed' each other yet, there is no punishment suggested for the equal sin. This double standard directly alludes to the gender inequality in this ancient period whereby women are subservient and subjugated to the patriarchal dominance that dictates their lives. Similarly, Tiggy Entwhistle's husband abandons her for a 'young' woman this highlights that as a man he believes that he is above 'honour(ing)' their mutual commitment and betrays her. Thus, it is clear that despite the female advocacy which undoubtedly altered the patriarchal structure of society men may feel that it is acceptable and justified for them to break their loyalty and act in this offensive manner.

Furthermore, the notion of forced loyalty is also explored, as some women feel no choice but to act dutifully or obligingly. This is the case for the twelve maids in *The Penelopiad* who belong to such a low social strata. They are loyal to Penelope who instructs them to 'say rude and disrespectful things'; this instruction is essentially the crime in which they are hanged for. Therefore, their deaths pay for their obedience and loyalty. In the modern 'Trial of Odysseus', the objectification of the maids is evident as Odysseus' Attorney claims that they 'deserved hanging' for having 'sex without permission' and their slaughtering was 'within his rights'. Therefore, it is clear that the maids are murdered for their supposed betrayal of Odysseus, despite the sexual abuse that they endured. This highlights the terrible predicament that the maids face where they struggle to truly know where their loyalties lie as they lack free will and authority. Similarly, this notion of implied loyalty exists within a marriage. This is underlined by Theresa McTerry, a hysteric bride-to-be who claims that through marriage she will be 'possessed', 'owned' and be granted the opportunity to 'excel at supporting and obeying'. Thereby, the past participles exemplify the defining view of her as an object and the present participles suggest the degree of allegiance and obedience that is expected of her. Essentially, both authors insinuate that loyalty may be attached to many societal roles that women play in society and the ramifications of acting in an unfaithful manner can lead to tragic ramifications.

The notions of love and loyalty are widely explored within the two texts. The societal roles held by the various women seem to define where they love and loyalties lie. Characters such as Meryl and Mary struggle with their self-image and confidence whilst, Tiggy and Theresa's love and loyalties are determined based on the men in their lives. However, Penelope and the Maids seem to be expected to act in a dutiful manner in fulfilling their societal roles. On the whole, both texts foreground the challenge that women face with regards to the expectations placed on them and obligations to completely devote themselves to other members of family and society.

The mother's who appear in these two texts display ostensibly unlimited and unwavering care and adoration for their offspring.

Meryl Louise-Davenport grapples with her sense-of-self and discontentment which is partly due to her immense love as a mother. Mary O'Donnell also struggles with her self-image and vacillation between self-assuredness and self-doubt. Whilst, Zoe mirrors Meryl's this unlimited and forgiving love for her daughter. Likewise, Penelope displays this



In both texts, love, obedience and support are the fundamental characteristics that women are expected to exhibit. Additionally, the unconditional maternal love of women is a common feature of both texts. This fondness for others is single-sided as those who receive this love and attention do not reciprocate it. Similarly, a double standard exists as women are expected to be absolutely devoted to their partner but the same is not expected for men. In these challenging societies it may seem logical for women to loyally support each other. In reality these texts underscore the competition rivalries between women which society exacerbates.

According to the ancient Greeks there are eight different types of love. One of the key types of love that are explore by both Atwood and Murray- Smith

Pilautia: self-love

- only once you have the strength to love yourself and feel comfortable in your own skin, will you be able to provide love to others
- Meryl- self-deprecation
- Mary- doubts ability
- P: Helen loves herself
- P: P lacks in beauty but reassures herself in her intelligence
- Tiggy – learns to love herself 'hack off dead roots'

Agape: selfless love:

- Unconditional love
- Love and Loyalty:** Storge
- P: accepts Telemachus even after his defiance
 - M: continues to lead this unsatisfying life



Infidelity: Loyalty Men are not expected to be as loyal as women: double standard
Forced Loyalty: maids

Moreover, love is portrayed as a quality that is one-sided as at times the adoration and respect expressed from one individual is often not returned.

Meryl
Penelope and Telemachus

Love:

Undertone;

One sided-The actions of women are fuelled by love – love to children and love to parent

Her understanding stems from love

Loyalty:

One sided- women expected to be loyal but this is not expected of men devotion

In these societies that are centuries from each other women are still treated somewhat unfairly and it would be logical to assume that due to this women would support other women with a female bond and sense of loyalty. However, this is not the case

