

Richard II Essay Practice

In William Shakespeare's *Richard II* the audience's attitude towards the central character Richard changes through the play. At the start of the play the audience finds Richard to be vain, arrogant and childish and feel very unsympathetic towards him. This dislike then peaks when he wrongly takes Bolingbroke's inheritance. The audience's attitude towards him then changes when he returns to England in act three scene two and finds that Bolingbroke has almost completely taken over and when he is imprisoned at the end of the play the audience should see that he is having an identity crisis and feel very sorry for him in the end when he is killed in Pomfret castle. This character development forces us to think about how our impressions of people can change over time and that we should not reduce people to being just one thing even if we dislike them.

Firstly in Act One scene one we first notice that Richard is very vain, he is introduced to the audience centre stage dressed in full kingly splendour he is often set above the other characters on a raised platform or throne as in the BBC production 'The Hollow Crown' starring Ben Wishaw. As Bolingbroke and Mowbray enter both address their king with respect but only Mowbray gives a sincere compliment. Richard's reaction 'yet one but flatters us' shows he cares about peoples opinions of him more than the matter at hand.

King Richard is also portrayed to be childish and petty. Near the end of act one scene one the two nobles, Bolingbroke and Mowbray are clearly out of his control and when he cannot make these 'leopards tame', he becomes angry in a childish way shouting over the others 'we were not born to sue but to command'. Having been unable to calm the nobles Richard is forced to set a date for them to settle the matter by a duel but before the fight begins he throws his warder down halting the proceedings. He then choses to banish both Mowbray for life and, Bolingbroke for 10 years. This is a petty response to what he sees as their disobedience but it is made worse when seeing his uncle Gaunt 'grieve heart' he reduces Bolingbroke's sentence by four years which shows he is not only petty but also indecisive a quality which would have been greatly disliked in a ruler by a Shakespearean audience.

In Act Two scene one the audiences dislike for Richard peaks when Gaunt, who is probably the plays most sympathetic character who is liked for his love of 'This precious store set in the silver sea'. Attempts to reason with Richard and when he fails that simply tells Richard that he is just the 'landlord of England'. This makes Richard angry and he responds to Gaunt by threatening to 'run thy head from thy unreverent shoulders'. A short time after this Gaunt dies of his illness and Richard ignoring the Duke of Yorks warnings not to take 'Hereford's rights away', takes all of Gaunt's money and valuables and after hearing Yorks warning chooses to further spite Bolingbroke by seizing his lands as well as all his possessions so that Bolingbroke has nothing to inherit when he returns from banishment. This creates a peak in the audiences dislike for Richard as they feel sorry for Bolingbroke who at this point in the play is seen as the hero figure.

In Act Three scene two upon Richards return to England the audience still feels dislike towards him. However, when we see his reaction to the news that in his absence Bolingbroke has become strong and powerful we begin to feel slightly sympathetic towards him. As the scene goes on this sympathy increases with each piece of bad news Richard is told, first that 'all the Welshmen, hearing thou wert dead, are gone to Bolingbroke'. Next, that his closest friends Bussy and Green 'have felt the worst of deaths destroying wound'. Which then leads to Richard asking the men with him to 'sit upon the ground and talk of the death of kings'. This is significant as throughout the play Richard is always set above the other characters or, as in the RSC production, starring David Tennant, a tall actor is chosen to play the part. So Richard choosing to lower himself to sit on the ground is a humbling moment which makes the audience feel even more sorry for Richard. This moment can be seen as the beginning of Richard's identity crisis as he is no longer acting like a king and uses simple language, 'I live with bread like you, feel want, taste grief, need friends'. This breakdown in his language further shows his identity crisis as up to this point in the play Richard has spoken very eloquently using many extended metaphors and complex phrases.

The audience's sympathy for Richard increases again when in Act Four scene one when, after he has officially handed over the crown to Bolingbroke, Northumberland demands Richard 'read these accusations and these grievous crimes'. In this scene it becomes clear that

Northumberland didn't just want Richards crown for Bolingbroke but also wanted him to be executed as punishment for his and his followers crimes against England. At the end of the scene Bolingbroke prevents Richard from having to read the accusations and sends him away to be locked up.

Finally, in Act Five scene five Richards identity crisis is very clear. At the start of the scene he spends a lot of time analysing his thoughts as if each of them were a person. Some 'thoughts tending to ambition' and others 'tending to content flatter themselves'. This shows Richard is having an internal conflict between each of his personality traits and that he is not really sure who he is anymore. This is amplified when near to the end of the scene Richard snatches an axe and begins killing Extons followers which is a complete turnaround as Richard has been a man of more words than actions and has not shown any indication of violence up to this point in the play. Finally Exton kills Richard which makes the audience pity Richard as he has completely fallen from being the king of England to dying alone in a dungeon.

In conclusion through the first section of the play the audience view Richard as a vain arrogant, childish and petty person but after his return from Ireland begin to feel a sympathy for him which grows right up to his death in the dungeons at Pomfret Castle where he has completely lost who he is and dies alone still struggling with his identity.