

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLISM AND WORDPLAY IN SOME OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY AND THEIR RELEVANCE IN TODAY'S SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's writings are still relevant today approximately 500 years after his death. This clearly indicates the tall stature of the play wright.

The paper attempts to understand the manner in which all his plays, be it comedy, tragedy or history so accurately depict the nuances of that time period as well as the applicability in today's world and society. The detailing of his plays depicts the reign of monarchy, the importance of the supernatural spirits, as well as the sense of comedy. All three aspects are extremely important for the social fabric of the country.

RESEARCH QUESTION: The paper attempts to analyse the deep and widespread impact of Shakespeare's plays on English and American culture. His insight into the relationship between the actors and the audience as well as the burning issue of that time. In spite of his birth in 1564, the relevance of his plays in today's day and age still exists. The paper will attempt to reconstruct this connect.

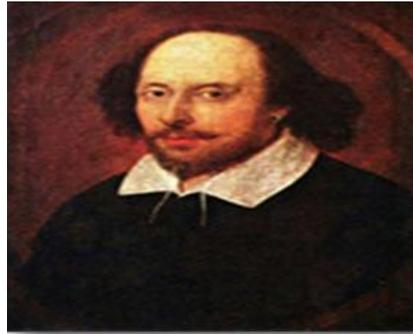
1. Introduction

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-on -Avon, England. He was an English playwright, poet and an actor, and an extremely prolific writer.

The period of his writing coincided with the Elizabethan and Jacobean ages, it is sometimes known as the 'English Renaissance or the Early Modern Period'. This period was the reign of Queen Elizabeth 1(1558-1603). London at this time was the heart of England, and it was an extremely important centre for both economics as well as culture. Shakespeare's plays were a treat to all sections of society. Everyone from the rich, to the middle class to the poor enjoyed his

productions.

Figure 1: Image of Shakespeare



Source : Google Image

2. Background

William Shakespeare is commonly known as the "Bard of Avon", he, till today remains one of the most influential writers and his works continue to be studied and interpreted even today. Most of his well-known works were between the years 1589 and 1613. It has been said that he was credited with great intellectual rapidity, perceptiveness as well as poetic power. He apparently attended a reputable Stratford grammar school where it is likely that he would have learnt Latin, Greek, theology as well as rhetoric. He would have had a catholic bringing up. His plays ranged from comedies, historical plays, as well as tragedies.

He was one of the most famous theatre artists of his time.

Figure 2 : Stratford on Avon



Source: Google Image

When Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, her successor was King James 1. Shakespeare was no puppet of the aristocracy, and wrote plays that questioned the kingship In spite of Monarchy in England, he practised 'freedom of speech'. Being popular and influential, he was not penalised for his criticism of the Rulers.

3. Reasons for Studying Shakespeare today

Shakespeare is as relevant in the 16th century as it is today. The reason being that Shakespeare had a keen sense on the political dimensions of that time, as well as a keen eye on the nuances of different characters. He used them effectively in various plays and poems. As his audience were from all walks of life, the impressions of his messages were absorbed by all. The Elizabethan era was one where the economy was facing a transformation in terms of richness, income, spending power as well as fashion. The aspirations of the public were aroused with his plays.

The use of nuances, situations, narratives in his plays, Shakespeare did have the ability to take on the 'powers', at that time. As he was such an important, popular playwright, his point of view, did hold a lot of strength. Freedom of speech was one of the most important virtues, that was adequately depicted in his plays.

The reason that his plays hold a lot of meaning even today, is that centuries have passed, but the nuances, and situations have not changed. Characters, governance have changed, but the plight of the downtrodden have not. There are new meanings that can be advocated to situations that were prevalent at that time. An example is from the character of Shylock the money lender in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* has been a fascinating play since it was debuted in England in 1605. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth 1, the play portrayed a crafty Jew money lender, who obtained his pound of flesh from anyone or everyone who borrowed money from him. He has been portrayed as a ruthless man. Overtime this very same character has taken on different types of hues. Very often the portrayal has been on him being the victim rather than one who has inflicted pain. This portrayal has happened overtime, especially in the light of the manner in which Hitler treated the Jews. The quote "Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same disease, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter also and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us do, we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?"

This in recent times is seen as the voice of the voiceless, the downtrodden. It is this capacity of Shakespeare writings that make him the most prolific and learned writer.

With changing times and even after 400-500 years his quotes are still relevant and one can interpret it in a matter from being a victim to one that is victimised.

Figure 3: Image of Shylock in Merchant of Venice



Source: Google Image

4. Study of His Plays

Shakespeare, basically wrote plays across three sets of genres; Comedy, historical and tragedies. Historically it has been difficult to place a set pattern of chronological sequence with respect to his writings and when the plays were performed.

Shakespeare's comedies are often extremely funny stories, involving romances, mistaken identity, magic, love potions, grand adventures, shipwrecks, long lost twins, clowns and comic hijinks. Shakespeare has his characters travel to new and distant lands, adding to confusion and a comedy of errors. But what results is that almost all of them end with 'is that they all end well', along with amiable resolution to all the issues that may have cropped up during the story.

4.1 Comedies

Some of the well-known plays under this category are:

- A Midsummer Night's Dream
- Much Ado about Nothing
- The Comedy of Errors
- Twelfth Night
- As you Like It
- The Merchant of Venice
- The Tempest

All his comedies ended on a happy note, with no death, and at times a marriage. Any person who tried to derail a happy story, did get chastised

There are some commonly recognised characteristics that run through all his comedies. These are:

- 1) Mistaken Identity. These could even take up that women are dressed up as men, e.g., in *As You Like It*, Rosalind impersonates a man in order to mentor her would be lover into the man that she secretly desires. He did realise that disguising one's gender can be funny when it is required for the story. This ploy has been used in movies that have been screened recently too e.g., *Tootsie*, and *Mrs Doubtfire*.
- 2) His plays also clearly bring out the conflict between the heart and the mind. He challenges the audience to think in this direction too. They bring out the contradictions that are always apparent in Human Behaviour.
- 3) His plays do tend to invoke the super natural. While playing with this idea he portrays humans as pawns in some huge game plan. The events that follow seem to be beyond Human control and rational understanding, which is why they are enjoyed even today.
- 4) Most of the plays are given the most picturesque settings. Shakespeare wanted the audience to experience a world as they would like it to be. He also tried to portray that even in the most idyllic environment, things can still go wrong. It gives solace to the audience that if things go wrong in a perfect setting, then if similar things happen in our 'not so perfect world', it is just fine.
- 5) Separation and Reconciliation. As love is the central theme in most Shakespeare's plays. Where there is separation, there is eventually reconciliation, though the journey may be long and difficult.
- 6) Most of the plays under this genre always have a happy ending. The happy endings in Shakespeare's comedies point at a way in which confusion has been resolved amongst his characters in the play.

4.2 Tragedies

The basic theme that runs through the Shakespeare's tragedies are that there is a 'fatal flaw', in the main character of the play. They have a weakness in their personality, that eventually leads to their downfall. Most of the protagonists whose downfall is depicted in his plays are powerful and rich. Fate and free will are the two most important themes in Shakespeare's works. Just as it is expected that a happy ending is inevitable in his comedies, so is it a foregone conclusion that in

tragedies there would inevitably be death, destruction and disaster.

His tragic plays were not part of the Elizabethan reign but more under the rule of James the first. This also reflected that the happier time under Queen Elizabeth the first were things of the past. There are difficult times ahead under James the first. It did reflect the sombre mood of that time.

The tragic events in this genre of plays are based on human suffering, along with the terrible and sorrowful events that befall the main character. The elements can be put in the following manner:

- A tragic hero
- A conflict between good and evil
- Issues of fate and fortune
- Greed
- Foul Revenge
- Supernatural Elements

4.3 Histories

This era of Shakespeare's plays is set during the times of Medieval English History. They look at the number of years of conflict between England and France. The four most important themes that run through these set of plays are:

- They depend on a believable and reasonably accurate setting
- Conveys the flavour of the period with respect to sights, sounds, and characteristics
- Language is appropriate to the setting
- Faithful to the facts of the period

Shakespeare's historical plays dealt mainly with the events from King John to Henry VIII. He was concerned with order, disorder, importance and the continuity of the monarch. He was also concerned with the disorder during a monarch's reign, as well as the importance of continuity. He was extremely concerned with the destructive impact of civil wars. Audience at that time were eager to know about the history of the country. Shakespeare's plays fulfilled this desire. He brought out important elements in his plays, like the fact that misfortune of the society followed the sins of its rulers, the sacredness of kingship and the wickedness of rebellion.

5. Contrasting Studies of Different Genres

Working with specific examples of different genres, would enhance the insights of the manner in which Shakespeare prepared and enacted his story line.

MERCHANT OF VENICE

A famous comedy of his time was 'Merchant of Venice'. A play written by him between 1596-1598. The basic theme on which the story weaves itself is that a merchant in Venice named Antonio, defaults on a large loan provided by a Jewish moneylender Shylock. Shylock is insistent on claiming his due which is a pound of flesh from Antonio. But Antonio's lady love Portia dresses up as a man and argues the case for Antonio, saying that the contract does talk about giving a pound of flesh, but it does so in a manner that no drop of blood should be spilled. This puts Shylock in a dilemma. Antonio is released from the bond, his ships are safe, he is in a position to pay his loans. At the end he accepts his daughter's husband, agreeing to give them his wealth when he dies. In the above play there is tragedy as well as comedy but eventually all things turn out well for everyone. Shakespeare brings out the character of a Jew as well as his attitude towards Christians.

Figure 4: Image of one of Shakespeare's comic plays : The Merchant of Venice



Source: Google Image

MACBETH

Amongst the famous tragedies that Shakespeare is 'Macbeth'. In this story the noble warlord murders a fellow human being for his crown. The result being that he is tortured with guilt to such an extent that he drove himself to death. The play brings out adequately fatal flaws, fatal

mistakes, good versus evil, fate and fortune, revenge, death and destruction and supernatural forces. Macbeth feeds on society's superstition at the time by including the three witches and Banquo's ghost. The witch's prophecy about Macbeth and Banquo; two characters with totally opposing attributes. Macbeth murders Banquo and his sons and prevents the prophecy of his sons ascending to the throne. Banquo's ghost compels him to reveal his sins to his guests.

Figure 5: Image of Macbeth (One of Shakespeare's Tragic Plays)

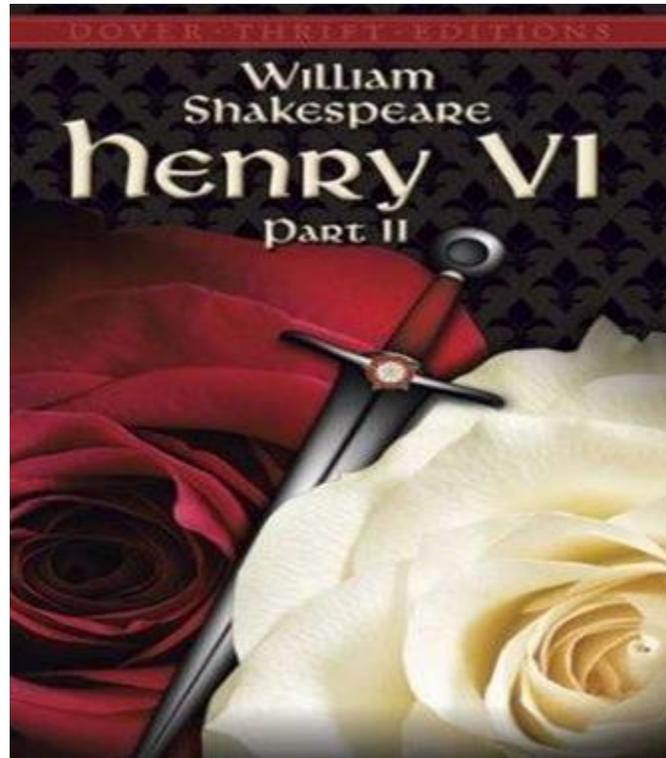


Source: Google Image

HENRY VI PART -2

An important historical play that Shakespeare wrote was Henry VI part -2. It was set during the lifetime of King Henry VI of England. What was most important in this play that no playwright before Shakespeare had dared to put upon the public stage based upon English History. Some critics have argued that this may not be the first, but what all of them do agree that Shakespeare was amongst the first to treat the subject in a mature fashion, where he could look at his protagonists, objectively rather than in the manner of a worshipper of historical, political, and religious myth. The storyline is that against the wishes of the nobles, King Henry marries the penniless Margaret. She in turn plots against him with the help of her lover. As tensions between York and Lancaster build up, York secretly leads a rebellion, his supporters proclaim him king, and Henry is forced to flee.

Figure 6: Image of Henry VI, part II, (Shakespeare's Historical repotaire)



Source: Google Image

6. CONCLUSION

Shakespeare's plays though set in the 16th century, are extremely relevant then and even today. The drama the intrigue, the open criticism on the political powers, as well as the fact that truth always prevails over evil, are still extremely important characteristics. At that time with Monarchy ruling over England, Shakespeare still had the verve to point out mistakes by the monarch who was heading the kingdom at that time. It has been seen that even if they took cognisance of his advice, it did not mean that he would toe the line.

This type of attitude does exist in the democracies of the world where freedom of speech is the most important weapon against what citizens, artists, authors, newsreaders, and critics think is wrong with the system.

The intrigue and planning, the use of super natural, as well as love and comedy are so expertly woven in all his plays. He uses the power of suspicion and the occult in a number of his plays, a prime example being 'Macbeth'. This echoes in India where superstition, occult, soothsayers are an extremely important part of our society.

The perception of character has changed over the centuries and Shylock the Jew can be compared to the marginalised in our society. It is this ability of Shakespeare, that makes him an evergreen playwright, with relevance even today, and also the fact that the plays and their plots have been translated into various languages, as well as adapted to local movies and vernacular plays.

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