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Eternal Pertinent Themes of Shakespeare

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Abstract

The icon of English literature and the dramatist par excellence William Shakespeare continually remains a firm fascination and enthrallment in the minds of modern day society. Despite departing this earth nearly 400 years ago in 1616, his legacy of the themes and characters of his written works ensure his relevance to society past, present and future never wanes. His themes are eternal and pertinent as Dr. Johnson says that "he is for all ages and for all countries". He has created many immortal themes through his fantastic and improbable characters both male and female in his plays that are relevant today. In this ultramodern scientific globe his themes and stories are much relevant and the modern people have the rationale to understand his themes very well than his own people of his times of the 16th century. Even the 20th century people failed to understand most of his immortal themes as they did not have that much of reasoning to anticipate his themes in their lives. The themes he has given to the world are immortal as we face such themes in our day today lives. We experience all his characters lively and everyone reflects repeatedly these themes in their lives. Macbeth, the ill-ambitious general, with his evil desire to capture power has surpassed all the moral values. Othello, the jealous and envious Moor has devastated his life. Lear, the proud and egoistic king never likes to hear what he dislikes. Caesar, the autocratic, undemocratic ruler of Rome never likes to follow the reality of the world. Such themes and personalities are very much alive in all times and in all countries. His themes never die as the creator of these themes left us four centuries ago. His significant themes have become the most appropriate themes for the modern entertainment world as these give both enlightenment and entertainment.

Keywords: Eternal, Pertinent, Immortal, Ill-ambition, Jealousy, Envy, Proud, Ego, Autocracy, Entertainment, Enlightenment, Love and Hatred.

1. Introduction

Shakespeare the historical figure has been introduced to us in one way or another, but there is always an opportunity to broaden your knowledge and understanding about the Swan of Avon and various themes he has used in his dramas which are pertinent today. The world's entertainment and enlightenment are incomplete without his themes and ideas. He has inimitable and unique talent for writing and any of his readers will never get disappointed or disenchanted through his writings. He is innovative, matchless, incomparable and peerless in producing the themes of his plays and he surpassed even the Greek and Roman Dramatists. The themes and ideas that emerge from his plays are timeless. His characters and stories reveal universal truths about the human condition in a way we can all relate to whether it is the tragic outcome of unchecked greed, jealousy, pride and ambition, an unrelenting desire for revenge, the pursuit of love and hatred, showing of great pride and ego, sacrificing the life for the sake of love and power, capturing the throne of the country and ruling the country in an autocratic way. His representation of human nature is just as real and as relevant today, as it has been through the centuries. Even the themes and characters he has produced more relevant and applicable today when compare to his age. He is awesome, amazing and tremendous in studying the human nature and behavior. His themes are not only awe inspiring, but universal and give appropriate healing to the pathos of the society.

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He has added many new words to the English language and thus with his powerful words and dialogues, he gives new themes to the world. He dares to teach us that the sinister and baleful characters lead us towards devastations and good and excellent characters give us blissful, harmonious and delightful life in the world. He does not produce his plays to teach or instruct, but his plays give us lot of teachings and instructions.

2. Immortal Themes

The content and themes of Shakespeare's plays offer the reader an enjoyable literary encounter; hence his works have stood the test of time. People never dislike his work and also his works give them lot of wisdom and knowledge. Some countries tried to ban Shakespeare by telling that his dramas had "unhappy endings, lacked diversity and failed to promote the rejection of racism and sexism". They said that Julius Caesar must be banned because it elevates men, whereas Anthony and Cleopatra was undemocratic and racist.

Most of the critics of the world argue that the ideas behind the banning of any plays of Shakespeare is illogical, absurd and never have any rationality, as his plays have the immortal themes that are suitable for all times. The critics of the world at large oppose any move to ban Shakespeare in any part of the globe and declare that the themes are highly suitable, appropriate and immortal. Thus, in all the universities of the world Shakespeare is taught as the universities consider that the teaching of English language and literature is incomplete without his plays. His works also give high vocabulary to the English language and excellent themes to the World.

His plays are screened to educate, entertain and enlighten the people of the world about the relevant and pertinent themes of this great dramatist of the world. The reality is he knows how to craft a good story and his collection of plays covers a wide range of subject matter, appealing to all types of people. His themes are war, religious conflict, racial prejudice, class division, love, death, betrayal, jealousy, vaulting ambition and pride etc. The plots, characters and themes are cleverly and captivately weaved together, resulting in a tale that could be tragic, comedic, dramatic, passionate, thought-provoking – or perhaps encompassing all these as we find these themes in Macbeth, Othello, Lear and Julius Caesar etc. A successful writer keeps his reader engaged, explores pertinent issues, challenges thoughts and opinions, and uses effective language to convey the content. His plays are as popular as and maybe even more popular than they ever were which means that people must be entertained by them. And people have every reason to be entertained by them – they contain lots of sex and violence, strong feelings expressed in the most extraordinary language, bold and memorable characters and unforgettable themes and images.

His themes speak better to a modern audience bewildered by change, ambiguity and senseless violence than they did to the Victorians who could not understand why he would write about dealing with changes, deceptions, ambiguity and senseless violence. They did not get why Cordelia dies so pointlessly, Lady Macbeth influences her husband so grievously, Desdemona loves Othello immortally and Portia solves the problem of Antonio but the modern audiences do. All the people of the world have the same problems and behaviors as shown in the plays of the great

dramatist. The stories are timeless, as proved by the fact that many of the themes which he deals with, come up again and again in modern literature, film, and theater. All the movies today in one way or the other connected with the writings of Shakespeare. He too did not write his own stories as he had borrowed his stories from other sources and moulded them to be applicable for all times and all spaces. He was both customary and innovative, with old stories he wrote new plays which stands the test of all times. He broke the long established and time honoured rules to write in an innovative and relevant way. He broke the three unities, the unity of time, place and action in a very cleverly way and mixes both tragedies and comedies and also distorted the histories to meet the expectations of his audience not only in his times, but all times. He is awesome and innovative in his own way to fit the modern world. He pioneered many new plays and new stories and new characters to suit the present day world.

His men characters are very different from each other as Brutus is completely different from the character of Romeo. Brutus is a man of honour, dignity, worthiness, goodness, nobility, self-esteem, self-respect and duty bound whereas Romeo is dreamy, loving, passionate, adoring, amorous, affectionate, hot blooded, quick tempered and silly romantic character in nature and nothing to do with the great and mighty character of Brutus whom the Citizens of Rome declared their king after the brutal and wicked murder of Julius Caesar. The two great tragic heroes Macbeth and Othello are differentiated clearly as Macbeth is ill-ambitious and has possessed the superiority complex where as Othello has the inferiority complex and leads a jealous life. Macbeth loves his consort extremely where as Othello hates his consort extremely. Thus, the two great tragic heroes have different characteristics but the producer of these two heroes is same. He wants to present his themes before the world with different characters and even now we witness Macbeths, Othellos, Lears, Hamlets, Caesars, Lady Macbeths, Portias, Rosalinds and Desdemonas in our day today life.

3. Themes of the Shakespearean Tragedies

The themes of the tragedies of Shakespeare's plays which are relevant in our modern age are discussed here as the author and many critics who deal with Shakespeare have produced lot of themes. His themes of great tragedies are much relevant to the seven big sins mentioned in the Holy Bible, which says:

- These six things doth the lord hate: yea, seven are an abomination unto him:
- A proud look, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood
- A heart that diveseth wicked imaginations, feel that be swift in running to mischief.
- A false witness that speaketh lies and he that soweth discord among brethren. (Proverb VI 16-19 629)

The tragedies of Shakespeare have all the above mentioned seven sins. Macbeth and Othello shed the innocent blood and also devised the wicked ways to kill their kith and kin. Lear and Julius Caesar showed the unwanted pride and arrogance and thus they failed to understand the real world. As they committed the heinous sins they failed to get the pleasure of life.

Macbeth never enjoys the throne which he seized through murders and heinous acts. Othello due to unwanted

jealousy destroys himself and never enjoys the life as he has got both, good position and beautiful spouse in his life. Lear forgets everything due to his pride and shows wrath on his beloved Cordelia. Julius Caesar sacrificed his life for his arrogance and autocracy. These heroes have committed those sins, which are called the seven capital sins. The themes of these plays are ruthless ambition, hateful jealousy, immoral pride and egoistic arrogance.

3.1 Ruthless Ambition of Macbeth

The nobler self of Macbeth dies and he has now the unworthy self which is full of innocent's blood. Macbeth murdered King Duncan and Banquo and thus earned the evils in his life. The vaulting ambition leads him to damnation and as "Ram Bilas Sharma says that like Dr. Faustus, he has given his eternal jewel to the common enemy of man" (155). Macbeth goes to consult witches at crucial moments in violation to the Christian theology, he commits the forbidden communication with the witches just as Dr. Faustus communicates with the devil. He has started tasting the damnation and he cries that his blessed time is over and now remains a state of curse:

- Had I died but an hour before this chance
- I have lived a blessed time... (II ii 77-78)

Macbeth sees the doomsday in mustering courage to communicate with the evil spirits. "Harrison says that Macbeth wants to avoid sins and keeps himself straight because he fears punishment and not good thus he shows a negative character"(191).

He is damned as he knows well that bloody instructions boomerang to plague the inventor. Duncan is virtuous and it will plead like angels and by murdering him in his castle he commits the sin. Macbeth believes that murder of Duncan is an act of damnation. He has clearly sighted about his foul business. "A. C. Bradley says that it is Macbeth's fault because he has free will and responsibility to do whatever he can do in his life"(293). He follows his whims and tries to solve his problems through immoral means. He revolts against the principles of nature and thus he digs his own grave.

3.2 Hateful Jealousy of Othello

Othello has committed a sin and a calamitous mistake to throw away a pearl richer than all his tribe. "Edward Dowden quotes one of Shakespeare's sonnets:

- Some fierce thing replete with too much rage
 - Whose strength's abundance weakens his own heart?
- and says Othello is weakened by his unwanted rage and jealousy. The curious inquiry into complex facts, he has no faculty, he loses his bearing, "being wrought upon" he is "perplexed in the extreme". His hot blood mounts quickly to the point of boiling." (230) Othello doubts her chastity is a great blow to her trust in him.

Even the love between them depends upon different tastes. Desdemona loves him through hero-worship, due to his gallant, heroic, laudable and valiant adventures. Othello believes her to be a woman of rare intelligence who understands him and takes pity on him. "A. C. Bradley remarks that no subject is more exciting than sexual jealousy, rising to the pitch of passion (144)." Thus jealousy and inferiority complex lead him towards devastation.

3.3 Immoral Pride of Lear

King Lear is a play, which demonstrates evil and its retribution. Lear suffers mental torment for his unbalanced selfishness and vanity that lead to self-damnation of the doer. He is damned due to his sins of self-love, violation of human bonds and pride. He is utterly selfish, arrogant, bigheaded, conceited, proud and soulless to the extent of being bestial. Lear endures not only the external tempest but the suffering inflicted on his pride, his whole ego.

Proud Lear has committed blunders and has inflicted pain and sufferings on his kith and kin and thus he is near to damnation. He, in the beginning of his devastation suffers and later understands his sins.

- Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air
- We waul and cry... (IV vi 185)

Lear commits wrongful action, which starts spreading poison of evil and that sin brings inevitable retribution. "Campbell says that Lear benefits unjustly, misled by flattery to give unwisely, by anger to withhold unjustly and to see revenge for unimagined sights" (183). He suffers a mental torment for his unbalanced selfishness and short sightedness. "Ram Bilas Sharma says that the vision of infinite pain after death comes to him in his life time and he passes through all the circles of hell and then passes beyond the awareness of pain" (100). The self-defense mechanism provided to him by nature permits him luxury of insanity. He understands that his sufferings are the results of his earlier mistakes.

3.4 Egoistic Arrogance of Julius Caesar

Julius Caesar compared himself with the pole star that never changes its position when the senators asked him to cancel the banishment of one of the citizens of Rome; he furiously uttered these words in arrogance and declared that he would not fear anybody. This autocratic ruler never cares when the soothsayers warned him about the ides of March. He says and believes:

- Cowards die many times before their death
- The valiant never tastes of death but once (II ii 33-34)

Julius Caesar never cares his life due to his arrogance and at last he was brutally murdered by the senators.

Thus Macbeth, Othello, Lear and Julius Caesar showed lust for power and wanted to suppress their kith and kin for their unwanted and unethical pride, ill-ambitions, unjustified jealousy and egoistic arrogance. Their guilty ambition, futile ideologies and unwanted thoughts seconded by diabolic malice and wickedness lead them towards devastation. Their body is convulsed by poison and they fail to distinguish poison and food. Their life has become a *tale told by an idiot signifying nothing* (V v 27-28) and they fall by crying:

- My way of life
- Is fall'n into the sear the yellow leaf (V iii 23)

The tragedies of Shakespeare mostly have the devastating and desolate themes but Shakespeare has different themes for comedies, histories and romances, but all his themes are immortal as we can observe these themes in our daily life and all the times and also in all the countries.

4. Conclusion

Shakespeare's themes are still relevant today as the tragic heroes mentioned above clearly committed the heinous acts in their lives and thus they suffered very grievously also. The dramatist wanted to instruct us such abomination will

breed only such unrest in the society. The modern world witnesses these themes often and people with vaulting ambition, black desire, illegal aspiration, pride, self-importance, conceit, arrogance, egotism, jealousy, envy, covetousness and distrust suffer and ultimately these traits lead them towards devastation. His themes are classics and timeless in the world literature. Studying and appreciating Shakespeare also helps students develop a certain mental discipline in analyzing their characters, temperaments, behaviours, and personalities. They talk about universal themes and issues which are relevant today. Movies based on his themes continue to do well at the modern box office. He was the first to define many psychological disorders, personality types which later the psychologists like Freud, Jung used these traits to create better works on human psychology. While it may appear that a lot has been changed, the essence of Shakespeare has not been lost, it has merely been adapted to make it more appropriate for younger audiences of today as panacea.

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