

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE AND HIS THEMES

VARUN ARYA
M.A.English,Jkset
Nowshera,J&k

ABSTRACT: *Those who are familiar with or those who know nothing about English Literature, William Shakespeare is the name which is not new to any of them. Even I can say that English literature is read because of him. He is a parallel to the literature of English speaking or English knowing world. William Shakespeare is the figure which is widely studied, widely loved, widely researched and widely discussed. Owe to Robert Graves, a prolific English poet, scholar and novelist:*

"The remarkable thing about the Shakespeare is that he is really very good-inspite of the all the people who say he is very good".

A poet, playwright and a actor regarded as England's National poet and the "Bard Of Avon", A greatest writer in English language and the world's pre eminent dramatist. His popularity is accessed by the fact that his works have been translated into every possible language on the earth. Approximately thirty nine plays, one hundred and fifty four sonnets, two long narrative poems and a few other verses. Many of his works published during his life time with variations and deviated accuracy. But after his death, two of his friends and fellow actors namely John Heminges and Henry Condell published First Folio with a preface by Ben Jonson.

During the modern times his works have been repeatedly adapted and rediscovered by scholars. And they are still studied, performed and reinterpreted in diverse cultural and political contexts allover the world. Ben Jonson in his preface to First folio mentioned Shakespeare as "Not of an age, but for all times". He lived 400 years ago in England. The conditions, circumstances and more importantly the language were entirely different. Even the ordinary English man or woman would find him strange. But his world wide appeal denies all the assumptions

Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, England, Baptised on 26 april 1564, began a successful career in London as an actor, writer, and a part owner of a playing company called Lord Chamberlain's Men which was later became King's Men. His birth is traditionally celebrated on 23rd of april which is also his date of death. The records of his education are not pretty clear but it is believed that he received it at local grammar school. In 1582 at the age of eighteen he married 26 years old Anne Hathway with whom he had three children, daughter Susanna then twins Hamnet and Judith.

Theatrical life centred on London which ultimately became Shakespeare's professional home as shown by various records. Although he is credited with 38 plus plays, 154 sonnets and two long narrative poems but the only published work during his life time were his two long narrative poems namely Venus And Adonis and The Rape Of Lucrece published in 1593 and 1594 respectively. Both were dedicated to Henry wriothesley, The Earl Of Southampton. Another work that have been published during his life time was the poem Phoenix And The Turtle published in Robert Chester's collection of poem named Love's Martyr, in 1601. His sonnets mostly dating from mid 1590 published in 1609. But it is still unclear wheather it was a authorised version or not.

Shakespeare's plays were published as they were performed. The scripts of only half of them published during his lifetime. Therefore it is very hard to established their actual dates of first performance.

It is believed that he began to write for stage in mid 1580. The ambitious trilogy on the reign of Henry VI part 1, 2 and 3 and its sequel Richard III are among his early works. Titus Andronicus is supposed to be his first Roman tragedy and The Two Gentlemen Of Verona, The Taming Of Shrew, The comedy Of Errors and Love's Labour Lost as his first of comedies.

Keywords: Playwright, Play, Sonnet, Bard, Theatrical, Trilogy

INTRODUCTION

According to Oxford Dictionary of literary terms, theme is a salient abstract idea that emerges from a literary work's treatment of its subject-matter; or a topic recurring in a number of literary works. While the subject of a work is described concretely in terms of its action (e.g. the adventures of newcomer in the big city), its themes or theme will be described in more abstract terms (e.g. love, war, revenge, betrayal, fate, etc). The theme of a work may be announced explicitly, but more often it emerges indirectly through the recurrence of motif.

Owing to Wikipedia, in contemporary literary studies, a theme is the central topic a text treats. Themes can be divided into categories: a work's thematic concept is what readers "think the work is about" and its thematic statement being "what the work says about the subject".

So casually speaking, there are some general as well particular themes of the works of a particular writer. Talking about William Shakespeare, his works are widely read, widely researched and studied and it has been observed there are some common themes of his overall work and particular themes of particular work. We will discuss his common themes in first take and then we will try our hands in particular works. As it is stated earlier and most of us know it very well that his work comprise of 38 complete plays and a few incomplete, 154 sonnets, two long narrative poems and few other works. The overall observation of various critics, scholars and researchers reveal us that there are four common themes of his work i.e. Conflict, Appearance and Reality, order, disorder and change and finally levels. So let us take them one by one.

CONFLICT

Conflicts emerges as central theme of Shakespeare's work. If we have look at Romeo And Juliet, the plots moves around two warring families: Montagues and Capulets. The war of Montagues and Capulets further impacts the families of Verona. Hence the citizens of Verona are unwillingly are a part of the conflict. Shakespeare opens the play with a prologue and it is here that he explains the conflict between the Montagues and the Capulets.

"Two households, both alike in dignity, in fair Verona, where we lay our scene, from ancient grudge break to new mutiny, where civil blood makes civil hands unclean".

Shakespeare opens his play with the explanation of old rivalry in the first line. So the conflict is shown as a background and a backdrop of the play in the very first line.

Apart from the physical and external conflict there is also presence of internal conflict. It is when Juliet comes to know that Romeo is Montague. Her struggle to decide whether to hate or love Romeo gives rise to the inner conflict. At first she couldn't believe that she is in love with someone with whom she was supposed to hate.

"That I must love a loathed enemy". The use of must by Juliet depicts her choice that she has no other choice. She is not in a state to change the fact.

Again there is conflict between Tybalt and Romeo. The conflict between Juliet and his father, all it remarkably presents the theme of conflict in the play.

In the same way Hamlet also suffers with external and inner chaos and conflicts. Externally he knows Claudius is his enemy and even Claudius is sure that he cannot trust Hamlet. Claudius desperately tries to win over Hamlet and wants him to accept as his Uncle-Dad but Hamlet is never ready to accept it. And who can forget the substantially discussed and researched internal confusion of the Hamlet. His dilemma becomes the focal point of the entire play. As a sensible gentleman, Hamlet's hesitation after Ghost revelation and then growing suspicion gives rise to the inner conflict in the play. The most of the tragedies are carrying on the theme of conflict thoroughly.

APPEARANCE AND REALITY

Shakespeare has played upon the appearance and reality repeatedly in his plays. He is a genuine master of making things appear what they are not. In his own words: "All the glitters is not gold". To the audience the reality of a particular character is different and for the characters in the play it's different. Iago in Othello hides his reality by wearing a mask of honesty and loyalty. His impact on other characters especially on Othello is of a trustworthy fellow and is being trusted. But the audience is well aware that he is the culprit who is responsible for all the catastrophe. Angelo from Measure For Measure, apparently incorruptible, is in reality a deceitful sexual abuser. Shakespeare's plays are studded with the characters who are not real. A plenty of treachery, betrayal and dishonesty is their basic nature. More importantly they are the important characters who bring about the tragedy or the main change in the plot. Their reality is kept hidden until the climax. I will take example of Claudius from Hamlet, is shown as dual faced character and a villain but he is an important character of the play. He is enjoying the reputation of a well respected king. His reputation can be marked by the fact that he is being honoured by the Queen Gertrude. On the other hand Hamlet the hero of the play is seen with suspicion by major characters of the play including his own mother. So this was the clever technique used by the Shakespeare and it is very engaging. It added to his commercial success too.

Macbeth takes Duncan into his home as a friend and plans to murder him, claiming that "false face must hide what the false heart does know".

Shakespeare discovered a major convention of Elizabethan theatre i.e. disguise. It is best phenomenon to describe his theme of appearance and reality. Many of his characters are shown with hidden identities using the disguise. It was the important dose of Elizabethan stage.

Another important device of Shakespearean plays is cross-dressing which empowers the theme of reality and appearance. Males are dressed as females and vice versa. As men only played women in Shakespeare's time this added even more complexity to the issue. Some of the important such characters are King Henry, Duke of Kent pretends to be a servant in 'King Lear', Julia in 'Two Gentlemen of Verona', Portia in 'The Merchant of Venice', Rosalind in 'As You Like It', Viola in 'Twelfth Night', etc.

At the end I will bring your attention to the some lines of Hamlet:

"There's daggers in men's smiles

Some that smile have in their hearts, I fear millions of mischief

Why, I can smile and murder whiles I smile

I did not smile till now

One may smile, and smile, and be a villain

ORDER, DISORDER AND CHANGE

Most of the plays of William Shakespeare especially tragedies carry the idea or pattern of order, disorder and change. A stable life suddenly gets disturbed and brings about the change. The change can happen to a person, to society or to the nature as well. For instance King Lear goes mad, England is divided by civil war, and storms and the tempest ruin the life people and society. Initially there is stability that give rise to confusion and then change. Another important thing is observed that the ending of these plays. The ultimate ending of these plays is restoration i.e. stability. It has been questioned many times by scholars whether Shakespeare ends his plays with all restored or the disorder still exists. Rex Gibson a well known critic wrote in his book "Teaching Shakespeare" the detailed information about the themes of William Shakespeare. He outlined following examples related to the theme of order, disorder and change

- Nick Bottom is magically transformed into an ass in 'A Midsummer's Night's Dream'.
- In 'Twelfth Night', a false letter tricks Malvolio into changing from a puritan steward to a foolish would be lover
- Sometimes change happens in unique contexts: the woods, a heath, an island or a near magical setting of some kind.

Time usually underlines the changes witnessed in the plays.

LEVELS

Dr **Rex Gibson** was an English academic writing on the theatre. He is best known for his creation and editing of the Cambridge School Shakespeare series, for which he was given the first Sam Wanamaker Award in 1994. According to him Shakespeare employed his themes at three different levels in each of his work. He touches almost every sphere of life that are possible via three levels. These levels are individual level, the social level and the natural level. Let's take them one after one to understand. Firstly, theme at individual level, here implementation of thematic concept is personal and psychological e.g. if we take conflict as a theme it is experienced by a particular character psychologically and mentally i.e. inner conflict. As is the case of Hamlet's dilemma.

Secondly, thematic concern at social level i.e. family, society etc. Here whole of the family or a society is found involved. For instance in the Hamlet conflict is also found visible in the whole of the family apart from the hero of the play.

And finally the natural level, its natural or supernatural or may be cosmic. It is found visible in the form of ghosts, some storms etc.

So as discussed earlier there also particular themes of particular plays. Let's have a look on the some popular plays of William Shakespeare:

Othello (The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice)

It's a tragedy, believed to have been written in 1603. The story revolves around its two central characters: Othello a Moorish general in the Venetian army and his unfaithful ensign, Lago. The theme of the play are racism, love, jealousy, betrayal, revenge and repentance.

King Lear

It explores the concept of possession and identity, cruelty and tenderness. It is a tragedy that depicts the theme of justice, nature, sight and blindness and on the whole a tired, tortured and broken body.

Hamlet

The chief themes of Hamlet are revenge, madness, theatre and acting, corruption and sin and salvation.

Romeo And Juliet

There are recurring images that contrast light and darkness, reflecting young love doomed to death. Hence Love and hate, Family war, fate and free will, fortune and finally life and death are the main themes of the play.

Measure For Measure is based on the theme of justice

The Tempest

It is based on appearance and reality, change, order and disorder, conflict, Corruption and treachery, imprisonment and freedom, illusion and supernatural element, sleep and dreams and transformation and remorse

Macbeth

It dramatises damaging physical and psychological effects of political power that is used by characters to seek power. Its plot has thematic concern of ambition, evil, order and disorder, violence and tyranny, guilt and conscience and witchcraft and magic.

As You Like It

It is a pastoral comedy that shows the thematic concern of love, usurpation and injustice, forgiveness, court life and country life, and music and song.

Titus Andronicus

Revenge, blood and violence

Apart from these one of the prominent theme of Shakespeare is Theatre and Acting. Shakespeare himself was a refined actor and his love for theatre and acting can be seen in his plays. He successfully used the device of 'Play Within A Play' as a theme in his plays. This Elizabethan convention was a play writing technique used by Shakespeare and his contemporary that involves the staging of a play inside the play. It was not merely an ornamental convention but used very judiciously and with a purpose. In Hamlet, It has been used by Shakespeare to clear the doubt of hero of play. Hamlet used the method to get convinced that his uncle Claudius killed his father. The play was named as 'The Murder Of King' that involves the same plot as the events in the actual play. Shakespeare was a true lover of theatre and acting and is apparent in his own phrase:

All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women

Merely players,

They have their exit and their entrances,

And one man in his time plays many parts.

CONCLUSION

Shakespeare's concepts were universal and natural. The common human follies, ordinary life situations, joy and sorrow, love and hate, blood and war and so on all were his favourite thematic concerns. His writings are still relevant today. That is why these still read, watched and loved even today. I would prefer to conclude by adding few words of John Dryden "He was the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. But Shakespeare's magic could not be copied; within that circle none durst walk but he. He was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacles of books to read nature. He looked inwards, and found her there".

REFERENCES

- [1] The Oxford companion to English literature seventh edition edited by Dinah Birch
- [2] Oxford dictionary of Literary terms
- [3] A Critical History of English Literature vol.I, David Daiches
- [4] Introduction To Hamlet by Proff. M.K. Bhatnagar
- [5] www.wikipedia.org
- [6] www.nosweatshakespeare.com
- [7] www.ukessays.com
- [8] www.bbc.co.uk
- [9] www.thedramateacher.com
- [10] letterpile.com
- [11] www.shmoop.com
- [12] resource.acu.edu.au (Dr. Tracy Sanders)