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Vividness of human nature in Shakespeare: An introduction

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Abstract

Shakespeare is considered as the most popular playwright of the English Literature. His philosophical ideas lead the readers to find out the human nature from his literary works in our day to day life. Shakespeare is the author of Elizabethan period. In his writings, we find optimism, truth, pragmatism, straightforwardness, morals and didacticism, mingling of tragic and comic elements. Some of his plays are concerned with the external behavior of men. Indeed he has universal appeal and his own distinctive features to attract the readers. Shakespeare himself can be understood as the ultimate product of the philosophy of Renaissance humanism. He was an artist with a deep understanding of humanity and an uncanny ability for self-expression who openly practiced and celebrated the ideals of intellectual freedom. Shakespeare expressed his philosophy through his characters in his plays. He has been called an early existentialist. The study will present the vividness and luminosity of Shakespeare's writings.

Keywords: Human Nature, Realistic Portrayal, Realism, Renaissance Humanism, The Self

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare is the most notable and influential author of the Elizabethan period of the English Literature who is recognized as a philosophical playwright to all the critics. His plays are dealt with the universal thoughts and ideas which are mostly needed in almost all spheres of life. He also reflects love in many of his plays. He is poet of human nature. He presented all these themes with the use of a great number of versatile utility which are a bit upper than the general level of normal writing condition. Shakespeare has given morals with aphorism and impersonality. He also depicts the proper direction to the readers of all ages of different natural aspects. He possesses a great mixture of intellectual strength and moral perfection. He also deals with the spiritualism of man's life. He successfully exposes the problems of human relationships, meaninglessness of man's life, socio-economic condition and solution for those problems of all ages through the versatile utilitarianism in his plays and poems.

While William Shakespeare probably did not have the sort extensive humanistic education afforded those of higher social and financial rank than his own family, his education was clearly grounded in the principles of Renaissance humanism. The decidedly humanistic ideals Shakespeare often represents in his plays—particularly within *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar*—are grounded in the principles of Renaissance humanism.

2. Literature Review

Based on the criticism of William Shakespeare, enough critical essays and analysis was published in the shapes of different books and in many literary journals which are very useful as a supporting material for further study of the research. Different critical books composed by – A. C. Bradley, Samuel Johnson, Hudson, Cliffs, Coles, S.C. Sinha, and Dr. S. Sen etc remain helpful for the part of the study on Shakespeare's writings. The literary works by William Shakespeare become helpful for the research study. Moreover, the different literary web sites of internet are also helpful in this regard.

3. Objectives

English Elizabethan playwright Shakespeare is versatile in his philosophical ideas of his

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writings to present the universal needs and attitude of people not only of his contemporary era but also of all periods. The present paper finds out some philosophical ideas of Shakespeare especially about the human nature in his writings.

4. Methodology

To develop this hypothesis, the primary idea is found from the study on English writings of Shakespeare in the different course of the honors and masters level syllabus and from different critical studies of A.C. Bradley, Samuel Johnson, Hudson, Cliffs, Coles, S.C. Sinha, and Dr. S. Sen. After the development of the hypothesis to prepare the research paper, the planned way will hasten to produce the final thesis paper. In fact, the only helpful method will be 'Observation Method' for this research job. By using this method, the researcher has gone through different literature articles, critical compositions, and websites to find related study materials, in order to be acknowledged in the related topics and will also collect critical journals from different libraries to have specialized information on both the writers and compose the thesis paper in a more credible way.

5. Definition

Human nature refers to the distinguishing characteristics—including ways of thinking, feeling and acting—which humans tend to have naturally, independently of the influence of culture. (wikipedia.org) Human nature is in fact the psychological and social qualities that characterize humankind, especially in contrast with other living things. (dictionary.reference.com)

6. Discussion

6.1 Human Nature in Poetry

William Shakespeare was indeed a master of exploring the multiple facets of human nature: From the beauty of his sonnets, the comedy of his hapless protagonists, to the dark and twisted fields of love, betrayal and war. Without doubt the exploration of human strengths and weaknesses is the key to the popularity and survival of Shakespeare's literary genius, and its applicability across cultures and time. *Sonnet 15* references the idea of celestial influence in the growth of humankind:

"Whereon the stars in secret influence comment."

This idea of astrological importance is linked to the idea of Fate and humans having little control of their destiny. This also gives humans an excuse for their less than respectable moments. The power of the stars over human action is also linked to the ideas of eternity, which Shakespeare used to infer to the permanence of his written words in *Sonnet 18*:

"When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st"

It denotes the sense of human nature as being an eternal beast, never ending, and perhaps never changing. Shakespeare changes tune slightly in his sonnets when he reaches *Sonnet 130*. Here he emphasizes the more realistic side of human nature. Love of someone who is not conventionally beautiful. Perhaps even making fun of traditional love poetry, of which he has written much, not the most romantic description of a lover:

"And in some perfumes is there more delight
Than in the breath that from my mistress reeks"

6.2 Human Nature in Shakespeare's Plays

However, it is in his plays that Shakespeare fully investigates

human nature. In *Henry, IV* he explores the political side of human nature, an idea that has been explored over the last two millennia by political scientists. In particular *Henry IV* is "centrally concerned with political power – its sources, uses, manifestations, theatrical displays, ambiguities, and subversions". It also investigates the religious ideals that have been behind many outbreaks of war: To chase these pagans in those holy fields Over whose acres walked those blessed feet Which fourteen hundred years ago were nailed For our advantage on the bitter cross. Political intrigue is a common element throughout Shakespeare's plays, especially in relation to his royal characters. This is a device to explore the baser elements of human nature. Whilst the evils and sexual perversions of humankind are not explicitly discussed, the use of political sparring allows Shakespeare to relate such base human nature to the development of political and religious institutions. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare uses many images of human nature at its worst: greed and betrayal, extramarital sexual liaisons, and revenge. He also returns to the idea of celestial energy being a guiding factor in a character's personality. In *King Lear* Edmund states this explicitly: We make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars; as if we were villains by necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves and treachers by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers, by an enforce obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on.

The majority of Shakespeare's discussion of human nature appears to revolve around the weaknesses of human kind. While there is an exploration of human strengths, namely the power of love and loyalty, it is the baser side of human nature that captures the imagination. Shakespeare appears to take great pleasure in laying the human soul and psyche bare for the whole race to see, and admit that humans are far from perfect. (Norton, 1993)

6.3 Poet of Nature

"Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, and the poet of nature, the poet that holds up his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life." (Johnson, Para 8)

One of Dr. Samuel Johnson's most notable services to Shakespearean criticism is that he exposes the central style of Shakespeare's plays as its universality. He passes the judgment that Shakespeare is a "poet of nature" meaning that through his works he reflects life—the real life and manners.

Shakespeare is a poet of nature who faithfully represents human nature in his plays. He does not falsify reality. Shakespeare is a poet of nature also because his characters are natural; they act and behave think and speak like human beings. His characters are the faithful representations of humanity. He deals with passions and principles which are common to humanity. He does not merely depict the particular manner and customs of any one country or age. His characters are not merely kings and Romans. They are above all human beings. So, his characters have a universal appeal. But this does not mean that they do not have any individual qualities. The speech of one character cannot be placed in the mouth of another, and they can easily be differentiated from each other by their speeches. The dialogue he uses "seems to have been gleamed by different selection of common conversation and common occurrences." They are also true to the age, sex or profession to which they belong. They are also true to type.

7. Findings

7.1 Realistic Portrayal of Characters

In Shakespeare's characterization we find a realistic and convincing portrayal of human nature. Shakespeare does not depict persons of either fabulous excellence or unexampled depravity. The characters in his plays are not heroes but only human beings who act and think in the way in which the reader himself would act and think under the circumstances. Even where the agency is supernatural, the dialogue accords with real life. In his plays Shakespeare has shown human nature not only as it acts in real situations but as it would be found in situation which may never arise.

Shakespeare is most original in his portrayal of characters. Johnson says that no writer before him, with the possible exception of Chaucer, has portrayed human character in such a realistic manner. Shakespeare has gathered his knowledge of human nature from this personal observation. This knowledge has enabled him to portray a multiplicity and diversity of character and to reveal subtle distinctions between man and man. In this respect, he has none to intimate, though he himself has been imitated by all writers. Whether life or nature is his subject, he gives evidence of having seen things with his own eyes.

7.2 Realism

The universality of his characterization that Shakespeare's plays are full of practical axioms and domestic wisdom. From them can be formulated a philosophy of life, of great practical value in real life. He is not great only in particular passages but the entire conduct of his action brings out his greatness as a poet of human nature.

Shakespeare's realism, says Johnson is to be seen also in the fact that he does not give undue prominence to the passion of love in his plays. Dramatists in general give an excessive importance to the theme of love and often violate probability and misrepresent life. Shakespeare knows that - "Love is only one of many passions," and that it has no great influence upon the sum of life.

Johnson defends Shakespeare for his mingling of the tragic and comic elements in his plays on the ground of realism. Such mingling only serves to show us the course of the world in which "the loss of one is the gain of another, at the same time" "the reveler hastening to his wine and the mourner burying his friend."

Nor does Johnson disapprove of Shakespeare's violation of the unities of place and time. He defends Shakespeare on the ground of dramatic illusion. Literature is to be appreciated not by the literal sense but by the imagination. The audience's imagination is kept very active when he watches a play. The audience knows that he is going to watch a fictitious reality. If an audience in a theatre can accept the stage as a locality in the city of Rome, he will also accept the change from Rome to Alexandria. The unity of time may likewise be violated on the same principle.

Shakespeare, says Johnson, is the originator of "the form, the character, the language and the shows" of English drama. He is the first playwright whose tragic as well as the comic plays succeed in providing the dramatic pleasure appropriate to them.

Thus Johnson shows his penetrating power which probes to the very core of Shakespeare's wit and reveals its deep humanity and its sovereign realism. (literary-articles.com)

7.3 The Self

Shakespeare was very interested in issues concerning the self. He questioned a person's capacity to separate her personality from outward circumstances. Questions about the self permeate all of Shakespeare's plays: "How constant is the thing we call personality? How easy is it for someone to know his own character? Is character a gift from God or nature or neither? How solid is it? Is it a meta-physical essence or a social construction?"

In drama the audience watches a person or group of people undergo a personal change or remain the same over the course of time as a response to events. The character's self manifests on the Shakespearean stage and it's often in turmoil, uncertain of its self, and exceedingly messy. Through showcasing the muddled mind on the stage, Shakespeare attempted to dramatize how a mind can become fragmented through conflict with itself, that not everything is within a person's rational control and that self-knowledge is not always reliable.

8. Renaissance Humanism and Shakespeare

Renaissance humanism refers to the ideals of the cultural, social, and educational reforms undertaken by scholars, artists, and political leaders in Europe during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Renaissance humanism developed in response to the increasingly outdated and limited ideals of medieval scholasticism that had pervaded Europe throughout the previous several centuries. Instead of merely equipping professional such as doctors, lawyers, and theologians with the strict rules of practice for their professions, humanists sought to instill within the educated a strong sense of virtue and prudence through the close study of the humanities and particularly the arts of rhetoric, history, poetry, and philosophy. Humanism originated in Florence and Naples, Italy in the fourteenth century but began to spread throughout Europe in the early 16th century due to the large-scale printing and publication of classical and modern poetic, historic, rhetorical and philosophical texts. (saylor.org)

Renaissance humanism—which was practiced, in particular, by members of the clergy—was credited during the Renaissance with allowing for a greater emancipation of the individual (at least the educated individual) because many of the humanistic texts used within scholastic settings preached and argued on behalf of intellectual freedom and self-expression and served to expose individuals to customs and ideas from foreign cultures and past civilizations. A humanist was understood not merely as someone in possession of a great love for humanity, but rather as one who had mastered the humane arts in order to attain a superior level of knowledge, wit, written and spoken eloquence, and deeper understanding of the world and history.

Throughout his plays, Shakespeare regularly demonstrates and celebrates the ideas and ideals of Renaissance humanism, often—even in his tragic plays—presenting characters that embody the principles and ideals of Renaissance humanism, or people of tremendous self-knowledge and wit that are capable of self-expression and the practice of individual freedom.

Much Ado About Nothing by Shakespeare also reflects some of the key themes underpinning Renaissance humanism, which involved concepts of focus on human beings and their potential as well as the idea of perfect beauty.

9. Shakespeare and Psychology

Shakespeare was clearly enthralled by the functioning of the human mind. His dramas are innermost plays which mean 'psychodramas' with much of the momentous action stirring within the souls of the characters. And he looks at the human mind in the round; not merely ordinary rational waking consciousness, but also reverie, insanity, apparition, convulsions, and intensity of passion. He is concerned in nonstandard psychology (so-called) as much as the normal kind and he sees how one can pour or transform into the other. His importance on the theatrical aspects of personality is part of this more general interest in the mind's operations. It is often said that Shakespeare was a radiant psychologist, meaning that he had a deep understanding of human nature; in particular, his grasp of psychological types is unparalleled. That is no doubt true, but he also approached the mind in the spirit of a scientist—he is interested in how it *works*, what the components are, and how they interact. This is part of what is called Shakespeare's naturalism: he approaches the human mind as a neutral spectator and recorder, noting similarities and differences, trying to provide an accurate account of a natural phenomenon. Odd out-of-the-way mental phenomena catch his attention. Generalizations are exposed. Variety is respected. Areas of ignorance are admitted to be such. In this, Shakespeare is very much like Montaigne, whose *Essays* are explicitly designed as forays into naturalistic psychology—with Montaigne himself as the primary subject. Both authors aim to give us a clear portrait of human psychological nature, open to the phenomena in all their richness and complexity, and not preconditioned by some antecedent dogma or ideology, religious or scientific. Thus both authors are, above all, *candid*—unflinching, unsparing, forthright. All forms of human aggression, weakness, dishonesty, and folly are ruthlessly laid bare. Yet both acknowledge, and are sensitive to, the existence of human virtue; they do not fall for the romance of total darkness. Shakespeare gives us a panoramic perspective on the human mind, an all-inclusive accounting, as if he were aiming for a kind of completeness. No one could accuse Shakespeare of blinkeredness, of narrowness of vision. All human life appears to be there.

10. Conclusion

Shakespeare created human nature, as it now exists, at least in some measure. So enveloping has his influence on the culture been so ingrained are his words and his characters that we cannot help but be shaped by his work. We are all, to some indefinite degree, Shakespeare's progeny. And, if he is right that we are naturally theatrical creatures, it is entirely possible that his theatrical constructions should become the basis of the theatrical selves we project in daily life. You might, to put it crudely, become like Hamlet simply by seeing Hamlet on stage. This, too, seems to me plausible. Shakespeare's very fidelity to human nature, as he observed it, has come to modify human nature. But this is not to rescind the point that Shakespeare's genius is of the mimetic kind that he represented what he found to be already there. Bloom's formulation threatens to obscure this truth, though it can be interpreted in less contentious ways. Shakespeare's peculiar genius should be seen in his submission to nature. He didn't impose his own vision on reality; he let reality impose itself on his vision. He told us how the world looks from the perspective of itself. And the world never looked the same again.

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