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Shakespeare: A man of divine vision and a poet of all time

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Abstract

Ben Jones asserted that Shakespeare “was not of an age but of all time. Indeed, he is so. Today we can say that Shakespeare is not just a poet of England, but of mankind. And yet, whatever else he was, Shakespeare was not a reformer. Shakespeare is essentially a poet of life. He has accepted the gross and the gold, the beauty and the ugliness. He has, as Middleton Murray aptly describes. ‘The supreme power of inclusiveness’. Life and love are inextricably inter-twined in Shakespeare’s vision, both in the tragedies and the comedies. Love is one of the fundamental instincts of man, shared by the kings and the poor alike, Shakespeare, the chronicler of life, has realized this supreme truth, and that explains his immense popularity. He is a poet of the eternal pain, the human soul in intense emotion has expressed itself in his works, and men and women. Human tastes change, values change, and literary standards are never sacrosanct.

A great poet is one who has not only a deep insight into human nature but has also the ability to portray various human feelings and emotions in the most appropriate and eloquent language so as to hold a mirror to life. No mood, no whim, no vice is beyond his ken since human nature is both good and bad, a poet never misses the opportunity of satirizing or condemning vices directly or indirectly, nor does he forget to admire human virtue. We find all this and more in the poetry of William Shakespeare and we can say that here is

God’s plenty. Shakespeare was a man of divine vision with a deep understanding of human nature, bestowed with the gift of rare poetic talent of highest order. His formal education was little and whatever education or training he received, he received it from Mother Nature. No amount of praise is enough to describe a genius like Shakespeare. No language can do justice to the talent of a great son of Nature. How could a man with so little formal education write such great poetry to be universally acknowledged as the greatest poet of all time is a phenomenon that has puzzled the literary critics of various generation? He was a successful actor. He proved his expertise in adapting old plays for dramatic presentation. He was a successful playwright, a great poet and above all a successful man of business.

The poetry of other poets alloy the appetite it feeds but Shakespeare’s poetry makes one hungry for further reading. People are never tired of reading his poetry again and again relishing it and finding new interpretations. In the present paper the authors have tried to prove that Shakespeare is the greatest gift of God to humanity.

Keywords: beauty, supreme, inclusiveness, Love, eternal, sacrosanct, whim divine, vision, bestowed, genius, appetite

Introduction

Shakespeare has been loved, admired and respected in all ages for his versatile genius, deep insight into human nature, portrayals of remarkable characters and universal appeal of his different philosophies and ideologies. Lord Littleton has remarkable” no other author had ever been so copious, so, so bold, so creative in imagination with so perfect a knowledge of the passion, the humours and the sentiments of mankind. He painted all characters, from kings down to peasants with equal truth and equal force”. He is such a tall figure in the history of English literature that it is very difficult to find any other figure nearing his status. Matthew Arnold has rightly called him. ‘Out topping knowledge.’

Most of the records of Shakespeare's life are mere guess works since there are no solids proof or evidences about it. whatever the records that have come down to us about his life are based on the references which are to be found scattered in his plays and pomes, legal documents, church records of

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Baptism, his own testament and some few lines in poem of his contemporaries who praised him own praised him very highly. One of Shakespeare's biographers named Steavens writes thus about him" All that is known with any certainty concerning Shakespeare is that he was born at Stratford-upon-Avon, married and had children, went to London where he commenced as actor and wrote poems and plays, returned to Stratford, made his will, and was buried."

Birth and Parentage: William Shakespeare was the third child and first son of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden and he was christened on 26th April 1564. Out of the eight children-four sons and four daughters born from his parents the only member to survive the poet was his younger sister Joan, who is mentioned in his will. The other three girls died in infancy, and thought his brother reached manhood, they too predeceased him. His father was a corn dealer or farmer and trader in all kinds of agricultural produce and was a rich man and his mother was of gentle birth but in few years because of his being too much busy in public affairs and neglecting his own business, he fell into depth and difficulties. He was then compelled to mortgage his wife's property and gradually dropped out of public life.

Early years and Education: William Shakespeare could not get the full benefits of the education. It is usually held that he went to the free Stratford Grammar School at the age of seven and stayed there till he was fourteen or sixteen at the latest where he studied his "little Latin and less Greek". In later years he seems to have acquired some was cut short by the misfortune of his father and tradition has it that at the age of thirteen, he was apprenticed to a butcher.

Early Adventures and Marriage: There are many popular stories about Shakespeare's youth. One tradition says that as a young man Shakespeare stole a deer in the park of Thomas Lusy, and that it was due to this that he had run away to London to escape the wrath of that noble man. But a more authentic adventure of his life was in matrimony. It is on record that in 1582 at the age of eighteen he married Ann Hathaway, the daughter of an old family friend. She was his senior by eight years. The license was issued on Nov.28, 1582. The first child of the marriage Susanna, was born in May 1583. In February 1585, the twins, Hamnet and Judith, were christened at Stratford. Thus at the age of twenty one, he was burdened with three children and one wife. His early life at home was not at all happy. His father's financial hardships and his unhappy marriage tossed his mind much. Bidding good-bye to his wife and three children, he started his long walk to the capital in 1586 or 1587 in search of fortune.

Life in London: There are traditional which tell us that in London Shakespeare began his career at lowest rung of the theatrical ladder up which he ascended to its topmost step. It is said that he held horses of gentlemen outside the doors of theatres and that he was then employed in the theatre in a very means capacity. But very soon he became intimately associated with the theatre and literally knew its ins and outs.

The first company of dramatics actors which he entered was the Lord Chamberlian's company which was then performing at the theatre in Shoreditch. It was with this company that he remains associated throughout his dramatic

career in London. He played with this company at several other theatre, such as Global, the Rose and the Swan etc. as well as at the court Inns of court and on many stages in the provinces.

Shakespeare began with adapting and rewriting the plays of other writers among them those of Robert Greene. He collaborated with others before he wrote his first original play

"Love's Labour Lost" which was composed in 1591, retouched in 1597 and published in 1598, when his name first appeared as the author's. It is now believed that his dramatic period cover no less than twenty years, and it was his practice to write on the average two plays in a year.

In London, Shakespeare appeared twice before the Queen to act in his own plays. He soon bought shares in his own company; bought a big house in his native town and generally reestablished the financial solvency of his family. In 1599 he became a partner in the Global theatre. Thus in London, the life of Shakespeare was grand success both from the point of view of worldly fortune and of poetic fame.

His Patrons: It was an age of lordly patronage in which Shakespeare lived. The Earl of Southampton was his patron and to him he dedicated his sonnets. The Queen, too, showed signs of appreciation and favored by requisitioning the performance of his plays at the court. And after death in 1603, James I, too, continued the tradition of royal patronage to this popular playwright of the day.

Shakespeare returned to his own native town where from 1612 to 1616, he led the life of a sober citizen in retirement among friends and family relations. He looked after his estates, improved them, bought a coat-of-arms and made occasional visits to London to supervise the getting up and publication of his plays. He died at the age of fifty two on 23rd April, 1616 and was buried in the chancel of Stratford Church on the 25th April.

Influence of Renaissance: The Elizabethan age was very fertile mainly due to the influence of Renaissance. By 1579, many of the great works of ancient and modern times had been translated into English. And by the time the seventeenth century came, almost every book had been translated. Ovid's 'Metamorphosis', Homer's 'Iliad' and Aristotle's 'Orlando Furioso', Montaign's 'Essays' were some of the innumerable works that were translated into English. These works were read avidly by the Elizabethans and influenced the thought and works of all the writers of the period. Shakespeare too borrowed freely from classical and foreign sources and his plays are full of such references and they echo the spirit of the age fully.

Happy Blending of Renaissance and Reformation: While evaluating the Elizabethan age two major forces-the Renaissance and the Reformation-are to be reckoned with. In England happily one was not opposed to the other-both the forces blended and co-operated. The Reformation in England tended to humanistic and Renaissance was not divorced from morality. The Renaissance must have engendered a sense of the unlimited potentialities of man. Shakespeare echoed this spirit when he wrote in Hamlet "What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason? How infinite in faculties, in form and moving? How express and like a god and beauty of the world! The paragon of

animals.” Believing in its own unlimited powers, the man’s soul was out questing in both spiritual and material spheres. This is the meaning of the manifold energy and productivity of the Elizabethan age in music, poetry, drama and not less in geographical discoveries and explorations.

Love of fun and pleasure: The Elizabethans lived in the full tide of life. Life and more life – and its aching joys and raptures held them fascinated. They aimed at draining the cup of life to dregs. To exhaust all possibilities of life, material and spiritual, to enjoy all that life may yield, and to know all that life may mean – this goal the Elizabethans set before them.

Love of adventures: Piratical activities, often of the most daring and reckless kind, formed the principal part of naval expeditions. But apart from these organized voyages, single individuals sometimes undertook extensive journeys not only through Europe, but into the remote East. Echoes of the far sounding adventures occur in the literature of the time. Shakespeare makes Othello narrate his adventures to Desdemona, the best art, perhaps of captivating the fancy of a young girl in those days.

Excess of Energy and Spirit: It was an age of overflowing energy and spirit. Man sought to break away from the fetters of human body and social and political bondages to face the sun, to touch the sky, to reach the moon and to talk to the stars. The key note of the age was ‘adventure’. People revelled in bloodshed, murder, violence and vengeance on the one hand and in bravery, heroism, chivalry and sacrifice on the other. Naturally therefore, we find that Shakespeare’s comedies abound in chivalry, romance, adventure and youth and his tragedies are full of murders, bloodshed, vengeance, oppressions, atrocities and madness. This is what the age demanded and this is Shakespeare bountifully supplied.

The spirit of Patriotism: The Elizabethan age was the age of great and glorious national victories. England defeated France and subdued Spain in the historic Battle of Armada. A number of internal Dukes and Barons who had been revolting from time to time against The British sovereignty and claiming their independence were all crushed. Tidal waves of nationalism flowed through the country. The vast continent of America together with her rich gold mines was discovered and added to the dominion of England. Sailors returned with adventurous and fictitious tells of their meetings with fairies and demons filled the England atmosphere with unprecedented thrill and magic. The Tempest may be cited as a direct outcome of this new spirit which had taken England in its grip.

Belief in supernatural powers: The people of the Elizabethan age believed wholeheartedly in the existence of good and bad spirits. And the literature of the time exhales this belief to a remarkable extent. Shakespeare has made a dramatic use of the spirit world in Hamlet and Macbeth. The apparition at Elsinore, the witches on the desolate heath, the ghostly visitor at the Shakespeare well appreciated the tricks played by ‘strong imagination’. But in other cases he frankly voices the popular belief in sorcery and witchcraft. Hamlet asks the ghost

“Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn’d
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell”

We hear the portents before the death of Julius Caesar “Ghosts did shriek and squeal about the street”. We look upon ‘A Mid-Summer Night’s Dream’ and ‘The Tempest’ mere as charming fantasies; but the fairy world in the wood near Athens, the spirits that obey the behest of Prospero, were as real to many of Shakespeare’s audience as Helena and Lysander, Miranda and Ferdinand. Perhaps it was not Prospero the philosophic recluse, but Prospero the magician, who appealed primarily to the Elizabethans. In short, superstition was everywhere and people at every place reasoned with tales of wonders, omens and portents and presages and tongues or heaven.

Shakespeare – a man of his age as well as a universal figure: Shakespeare reflected the spirit of his time in his writings very honestly. He was certainly a man of his age. But there is the universal side of the man. He was a man of all the ages and this is by virtue of his dramatic power and incomparable poetry and insight into human nature. Compton

Ricketts has rightly remarked about him in these words “He is the supreme poet in an age of great poetry, because his poetry is wider in range and deeper in feeling than that of his contemporaries. He touches every mood; of graceful sentiment, as in the romantic comedies; of delicate fantasy, as in the fairy plays; of philosophic meditation, as in the tragedies of the mid – period; and of poignant passion as in the later tragedies.

A good borrower: Shakespeare was an astute borrower; with a ready eye for a good plot wherever he might chance to find it. He borrowed the forms and techniques from his predecessors who excelled in one or the other of the various elements which it was left to Shakespeare to integrate into his plays. Thus he became original by becoming indebted, since he brought nothing that singly was not already present but combined and created out of his own genius a form of drama which is unique in its many-sided appeal. He took much but gave more. He found ‘dross’ but turned it into ‘gold’.

His indebtedness: Shakespeare’s dramas are appreciated highly for blank verse, flexible prose suited to dramatic dialogue, songs expressive of lyricism, the supernatural and the blood and thunder of popular theatrical entertainment, plot construction and portrayal of character. And each of these was the special contribution of one or the other of Shakespeare’s predecessors. Lyly wrote court comedies using an artistic prose full of wit, grace and fancy and employing plots from the rich store of folk-lore and mythology. Shakespeare took from him almost bodily, some of the elves and fairies that dwell in moonlight. No less was he indebted to Lyly in the matter of constructing plots, employing prose dialogue. The blank verse was Marlowe’s contribution. Shakespeare learnt from him the art of dramatic expression of passions and imagination. From Kyd he borrowed the devices of sensational revenge, ghosts, thunder and lightning. His Hamlet was directly based on the Spanish Tragedy of Kyd.

His originality: Although Shakespeare borrowed from his predecessors freely, he was not a slavish borrower. He provided to his borrowed material to his own individuality and as such he appeared to be original. For example; in his

tragedies, he made use of the ghost stories, blood and thunder. He retained the elements of surprise, mystery and terror; but used them to finer issues. There are ghosts and witches and deaths in his tragedies but the emphasis of tragic conflict is put on the inner conflict within the soul of the tragic heroes. The ghosts and witches of Shakespeare are not independent existences, but embodiments of the evil conscience of the tragic character. Man is free to act and must reap the crop of his own deeds. Such is the tragic art of Shakespeare. In comedies, he employs the same elements of surprise and mystery as in the tragedies but the ending in these is happy. The mystery is dissolved, explained and harmonized. The common basis for both is the assumption of the abnormally both in tragedies and comedies, but the result in the former is unhappy, while that in the latter is happy.

The Poet of Nature: Shakespeare is the poet of Nature, the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of man and his environment, manners of life. His characters do not belong to this country or that, one profession or the other, but come from all lands and all walks of life. They are the rightful progeny of common humanity. His persons are not individuals. They are a species eternal and true taken from nowhere in particular, though met here, there and everywhere. And yet paradoxically enough; no two characters of Shakespeare are alike. He never repeats himself. Indeed universality of idea and individuality of character are his specialties. One of Shakespeare's sonnets, number 145, has been claimed to make reference to Anne Hathaway; the words 'hate away' may be a pun (in Elizabethan pronunciation) on 'Hathaway'.

“Those lips that Love's own hand did make
Breathed forth the sound that said 'I hate'
To me that languish'd for her sake; but when she saw
my woeful state
Doth follow night, who like a fiend
From heaven to hell is flown away;”

An Artist: Shakespeare was an artist and concerned primarily not with postulating theories of life itself. And the attempts made by some of his admirers to squeeze a philosophy of life out of the utterances of his characters, seem as unfair as it is foolish. When we read in Macbeth “Life is a tale, told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” or in Hamlet ‘Frailty thy name is women’, or in the Tempest. ‘We are such stuffs as dreams are made of’, we must take these reflections on life as they are and not as Shakespeare’s philosophies.

Charge of snobbishness against him: A number of modern writers on Shakespeare have insisted strongly on his snobbery hinting that he was essentially undemocratic, hating the mob. According to one critic, Coriolanus is a ‘mine of insults’ against the people. Even Dr. Furnivall admits “Shakespeare used the poor rather as a material for fun to amuse his richer patrons with than as folk with whom he felt. He does not show much sympathy with them – not so much as Chaucer, I think – but his representation of them are all in good part, and like those of Chaucer and Dickens, make his hearers think kindly of the men they laugh at”. No doubt Shakespeare had no liking for the rough, uneducated mob. But he was not blind to the virtues and merits of the people at large.

True estimate of Shakespeare “Although Shakespeare broke unities and usage, his writings never appeared to be dull or monotonous. He never followed rules and regulations set by the classical writers. He wrote his plays as he liked and yet achieved excellences in them. Matthew Arnold wrote in his sonnet on Shakespeare.

“Others abide our question – Thou art free!
We ask and ask – Thou simplest and art still”

Addison remarked “There is more beauty in the words of a great genius who is ignorant of the rules of art than in those of a little genius who knows and observes them.”

Comedy Defined: Aristotle has defined comedy as “an imitation of characters of lower type –not, however, in the full sense of the word bad, the ludicrous being merely a subdivision of the ugly. It consists in some defect or ugliness which is not painful or destructive, to take an obvious example, the comic masks in ugly and distorted, but does not imply pain “. He distinguished comedy from tragedy which portrays the sufferings of men better than those in actual life. Horace Walpole has defined comedy and tragedy in these words “life is a comedy to those who think and a tragedy to those who feel”. Comedy surely makes an appeal to man’s intellect and it always aims at correction and exhortation. It aims at making the people laugh and thus lightening their mind from the worries of life. It provides entertainment to the audience and ends happily. And the laughter which it arouses is thoughtful laughter, because the comic writer understands life and ridicules any abnormality that he finds in it.

Shakespearean Comedy: Shakespearean comedy is different from all other comedies.

While every comedy aims at correction and by appealing to man’s reason it helps him to get rid of evils, Shakespearean comedy aims at sheer joy and pleasure. Charlton has summed up his views about Shakespearean comedy in these words: “Shakespearean comedy is not satiric, it is poetic. It is not conservative. It is creative. The way of it is that of imagination rather than that of pure reason. It is an artist’s vision, not a critic’s exposition. Therefore; it should be kept in mind that Shakespearean comedy aims at nothing but pure thoughtful laughter “.

Humour in Shakespearean Comedy: Humour is found in all of his comedies and it has been provided through various means. In his early comedies like “Love’s Labour Lost”, humour is provided through the language of the dialogue and through the wit. But in the comedies written in his middle period, humour arises from the comic situations such as in twelfth night and “As You like It”. And the last comedies make the people smile only. They cannot make them laugh because they are somewhat better. The best comedy of this period can be The Tempest.

The theme of love: The most dominant theme of Shakespearean comedies is love in its varied forms. And they are full of songs and music - music is the food of love ` we are told in the opening scene of “Twelfth Night”. Shakespearean comedy deals with the story of love though the course of love is not always smooth. His characters face many problems in their love. But love conquers all and ultimately culminates in marriage.

The Romantic Nature: Shakespearean comedies are romantic. They are far removed from reality. Their settings are imaginary and the play of fancy in these comedies is unbridled. A Shakespearean comedy is romantic in nature in another very specific and technical manner, since it flouts the classical unities of time, place and action. Moreover he happily blends the tragic with the comic, thus flouting the rules made by the Greek classicists. But despite this romantic nature the real life hovers over it. Only the background is romantic; the plot of the play and the action of the play is directly based the facts of life.

The Role of Women: In Shakespearean comedies women have to play major roles. In contrast with his tragedies where men have been given prominent role, in comedies women dominate the actions of the plays. In "As You like It" Rosalind is everything; in "The Tempest" Miranda is dominating and in "Twelfth Night" Viola overshadows the passive existence of the Duke. Women are always on the front in his comedies and the males are insignificant.

The elements of disguise: Shakespeare often resorts to giving his female characters, specially his heroines, and the disguise of a man. In the Merchant of Venice both the heroines of the play, Portia, and her maid-in-waiting Nerissa are disguised as males for the crucial trial scene. In "As You Like It" Rosalind is disguised as a male for the major part of the play, especially in The Forest of Arden. In "Twelfth Night" Viola is disguised as a male throughout the entire play. Disguised, however, creates many difficulties.

Lack of Pedanticism: Shakespeare is never pedantic. He does not wish to preach or rectify the follies of the mankind. Since his comedy is primarily romantic in nature, its prime motive is to provide innocent, good natured amusement. His comedies in the finest sense`.

They are pictures of life in its sunnier aspects, it's sparking and therefore busy in the concerned endeavour. Orsino's proposal are coldly rejected. Yet he sends Viola again and again; Olivias's love is not returned by Cesearo; yet she sends the clown to call her lover. Thus; the action is based upon optimism and everything looks bright.

The elements of mirth, fun and pleasure: Shakespeare's comedies are replete with the elements of mirth, fun and pleasure. This is why they are full of songs and merry-making. The spirit of mirth and pleasure is provided by the presence of the fools in all of his comedies. The fools not only contribute to the fun and pleasure of the plays, they also provided the link between the main and sub-plots. Shakespeare's fools are very witty and they are considered to be wiser than so many wiser people. They are sometime mouthpiece of the dramatis. Though they range from the sublime to the farcical, they are never ridiculous or dim-witted.

Summing up

In short; we can say that William Shakespeare was an English poet and playwright, widely regarded as the greatest writer in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is often called England's national poet and the "Bard of Avon". Shakespeare was of his age; but he was also of the ages. The universal quality of his dramas is unique in the history of world's literature. He appeals to everyone, irrespective of age, sex, nationality and race. And

the wonder is that like Nature, his genius is an enigma and a mystery. While appreciating his universal qualities, Compton Rickett writes "He is the supreme poet in an age of great poetry, because his poetry is wider in range and deeper in felling than that of his contemporaries. He touches every mood; of graceful sentiment, as in the romantic comedies; of delicate fantasy, as in the fairy plays; of philosophic meditation, as in the tragedies of the mid-period; and of poignant passion, as in the later tragedies. In the verse that bodies forth such primal things as love, hate, hope, despair, courage, endurance, Shakespeare towers above his fellows. When we think of Lear in his desolation, or Othello in his last anguish, of Macbeth in his soul agony, and the despair of Cleopatra – we think of English literature at its grandest". It is very difficult to fathom Shakespeare. Goethe called him second only to god; Coleridge called him myriadminded". Wordsworth compared him to a mountain and it is because in him we find matter for all tastes, all prejudices, and all predilections. Here is knowledge without tears, pleasure without sin, and upliftment without penance. Thus Shakespeare is usually considered the greatest dramatist whom the world has known, as well the finest poet who has written in the English language.

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