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THE RELEVANCE OF SHAKESPEARE TODAY

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ABSTRACT

People still experience love, loss, betrayal, war, humour and tragedy, which give Shakespeare a foothold in modern times. Shakespeare forms a lens through which he sees life. We find ourselves quoting Shakespeare all the time. He wrote the most eloquent version of the code we call human character. The point about Shakespeare is he still speaks to audiences today. He is the icon of English literature that remains a firm fascination in the minds of modern-day society. Despite departing this earth 400 years ago, William Shakespeare's legacy of 37 plays ensure his relevance to society, past and present never wanes. Shakespeare's stories transcend time and culture. He had a profound understanding of us human beings: How and what we think, what we feel, how and why we act. He was an outstanding observer and communicator of human character. Many of his characters have become immortal in the sense that they capture types which are universal. Students today continue to identify with them and their struggles. By using just the right combination of words Shakespeare authored countless passages and entire plays so powerful, poignant, comedic, tragic, and romantic that many are still being routinely memorized and performed today, nearly four centuries later. There is no doubt that significant knowledge of the works of William Shakespeare is necessary for any education of English literature to be considered complete and well rounded. Students go into his plays because it is a requirement, but they end up enjoying it.

Key Words: Tragedy, comedy, betrayal, illumination, Human Experience, poignant, romantic

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Introduction

Ben Jonson rightly predicted Shakespeare's amazing future when he declared, "He was not of an age, but for all time!"

Four hundred years have passed since William Shakespeare wrote his last play. Yet his prose, plots and characters are as alive today as they were when the plays were originally staged during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Shakespearean works are required reading for high

school English students and a course or two for college students who study writing or literature. The plays have been performed in almost every language, on stage and screen and at popular festivals around the world. His plays touch on timeless themes such as love, friendship and vengeance. The language is rich, the characters are complex and many of his basic themes – love, treachery, honor, bravery and political intrigue – still vibrate today. A majority of his works were written

on such basic human themes that will endure for all time

Illumination of the Human Experience- Timeless themes and ideas:

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 and ambition, an unrelenting desire for revenge, or the pursuit of love. His representation of human nature is just as real and as relevant today, as it has been through the centuries. Shakespeare's ability to summarize the range of human emotions in simple yet profoundly eloquent verse is perhaps the greatest reason for his enduring popularity.

There is much profit to be gained from comparing and contrasting Shakespeare's characters with each other, and from learning the reasons for their strengths and weaknesses. It is to Shakespeare's credit that he conveyed these insights in such an effective and entertaining literary medium. Shakespeare's skilful and psychologically-astute characterization is utterly remarkable because it had been written hundreds of years before the concept of psychology was invented.

His plays provide a comprehensive and thoughtful look at the human condition, dealing with the virtues of men as well as their vices- love, faithfulness, greed, honesty, selfishness, mercy, lust, power and justice are just a few. As we study his plays, we understand ourselves better. He creates three dimensional, complicated characters. These characters which are very human - with positive and negative attributes - and constantly questioning the world around them appeal to any audience either Elizabethan or Modern.

The characters in Shakespeare are fallible and real like you or me, even though they may be kings, queens or noblemen and women. They are fallible in many ways, like Macbeth, who comes to grief because of ambition, or Hamlet, who struggles with the death of his father. Shakespeare invented his share of stock characters, but his truly great characters – particularly his tragic heroes – are unequalled in literature, dwarfing even the sublime creations of the Greek tragedians. Shakespeare's great characters have remained popular because of

their complexity; for example, we can see ourselves as gentle Hamlet, forced against his better nature to seek murderous revenge. For this reason, Shakespeare is deeply admired by actors, and many consider playing a Shakespearean character to be the most difficult and most rewarding role possible.

The brilliance of his language:

Shakespeare helped to form the language we speak today. He introduced words and phrases, and he is in all of our vocabularies on daily basis. The language is beautiful, the stories fantastic, they are as good as any modern or contemporary theatre.

Shakespeare was a master of the artistry of the English language. He wrote with such fluidity of thought, word, rhythm, and sound that the work is presented in a complex manner, but is not unintelligible, even for the inexperienced reader. Often a single line would have several different meanings, each providing us with insight into a character or plot.

"The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It dropped as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath."
(*Merchant of Venice*)

For such a prolific writer, it is truly amazing that Shakespeare continually produced both poetry and prose of such a high standard! No author in the Western world has penned more beloved passages. It is no coincidence that Shakespeare is the most quoted author in the Oxford Dictionary. Some of his phrases are so well known that we have forgotten the man who first said it. Like 'a rose by any other name', or 'parting is such sweet sorrow', or 'the world is my oyster'.

Shakespeare created beautiful works of art with his unique use of the English language. From him we get such basic words as bare-faced, baseless, countless, courtship, critic, critical, denote, disgraceful, dishearten, distrustful, dwindle, eventful, exposure, fitful, fretful, gloomy, hurry, impartial, inauspicious, lonely, misplaced, monumental, recall, suspicious. Whenever we reach for a pithy phrase in conversation it's more likely to be his than any other

His genius is evident both in the breadth and the depth of some three dozen plays, many of which are counted among the greatest works in

English literature. Examples of Shakespeare's genius include: the richness of his literary devices; the compelling drama of his plots; the penetrating nature of his characterizations; the universal interest and appeal in his dialogues and monologues; his delightful sense of humour; his enduring wisdom and wit; and his many famous, unforgettable lines. He continues to be the most-quoted author in the English language. For instance, the line, "All the world's a stage" is still used vividly by all sections of the society.

Here are some examples of Shakespeare's most popular passages:

- Beware the ides of March
- Frailty! Thy name is woman.
- If music be the food of love
- Now is the winter of our discontent
- Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
- Something is rotten in the state of Denmark
- The green-eyed monster
- The seven ages of man
- To be, or not to be: that is the question
- We are such stuff as dreams are made on
- We band of brothers
- What's in a name?

The craft of his writing is unprecedented. There are so many quotes of Shakespeare in common use in our society, and some of them, people probably don't even know they're quoting Shakespeare.

A Great Entertainer:

The content of Shakespeare's plays offers the reader an enjoyable literary encounter; hence his works have stood the test of time. 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 readers (war, religious conflict, racial prejudice, class division, love, death, betrayal...). The plot, characters and themes are cleverly and captivatingly weaved together, resulting in a tale that could be tragic, comedic, dramatic, passionate, thought-provoking – or perhaps encompassing all of these (Romeo & Juliet, for example). A successful writer keeps his

reader engaged, explores pertinent issues, challenges thoughts and opinions, and uses effective language to convey the content.

Shakespeare stands the test of time because his plays are universal. That is, the issues and situations in the plays relate to many issues and concerns faced today. In fact, they apply to about any era. One hundred years from now, the plays will relate to the "present day" concerns of that time.

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