

Student's Name

Professor's Name

Course

Date

Why the problematic Nature of Shakespeare's Plays are so popular in Modern Days

Introduction

The most generalized comment on why 'Shakespeare's plays are so popular even after so many years' is that the plays of this mastermind are enriched with something that appeals to the audiences from time to time and place to place. That is, one of the common aspects of Shakespeare's play is that his plays are universal. But the question is whether this statement is self-evident or not. Since art is mostly accepted either as the imitation of reality or as the construct of artist's mind, the universality of art as well as of reality needs to be defined. Shakespeare's plays are universal in the sense that they reflect reality. This reality is not the objective reality. Rather it is a kind of inner reality that dwell within the being of a man and that shapes the objective reality itself. In apparently simplistic language, but with rich metaphors and imagery, most of the Shakespeare's plays lay bare the existence of that very existential being before the audiences. Indeed Shakespeare was a modern artist ahead of modernism, because though "Existentialism officially emerged in the middle of the 20th century many authors expressed familiar ideas much earlier. Shakespeare's Hamlet posts some existentialist questions and expresses existentialist ideas" (Essay-911).

Johnson's Evaluation of Shakespeare's Popularity

Along with this exposure of a modern man's naked inner self, his artistic bent to present the most complicated and the most clandestine truth through the simplest and the most appealing poetic language wins the heart of modern people with the least effort, as in this regard Johnson

says, “Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life” (3). His art of characterizations also takes him to the core of human heart. His characters are not confined within the norms and rituals of a particular society; rather they are shaped by the common dynamics of human nature that exists in all the societies. Shakespeare’s portrayal of the characters is “not modified by the customs of particular places, unpracticed by the rest of the world; by the peculiarities of studies or professions” (5). Modern existentialist scholars tend to mark the universality of the characters -of Shakespeare’s plays- as the portrayal of human’s very existential self. Such appraisal of Shakespeare’s art of characterization appears to be partial, not complete. But Johnson marks Shakespeare’s characters as the portrayal of humanity as he says, “they are the genuine progeny of common humanity, such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find” (6). Shakespeare’s characters are not for any specific culture; rather they are the general delineation of some universal theme. Again referring the naturalness of his characters, Dr. Samuel Johnson says, “His persons act and speak by the influence of those general passions and principles by which all minds are agitated, and the whole system of life is continued in motion. In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of Shakespeare it is commonly a species.” (6).

Shakespeare’s Presentation of the Whole Truth of Human Life

Presenting the whole truth about a theme is another appealing feature of Shakespeare’s plays. While dealing with a theme he does not overlook any possible side of it, as Johnson says, “Upon every other stage the universal agent is love, by whose power all good and evil is distributed, and every action quickened or retarded. Traditional approach to love is centered on its decency, elegance and divinity, as if love is all. In contrast, Shakespeare did not forget to uphold the flaw, folly, blindness and also its complicated relationship with other social institution like family, because, for him, love is not everything of human life; rather it is a merely a part and one of many passion of human life. Referring to this aspect, Johnson says, “love is only one of many passions, and as it has no great influence upon the sum of life, it has little operation in the dramas of a poet, who caught his ideas from the living world, and exhibited only what he saw before him.” (4)

Measure for Measure

A critic describes 'Measure for Measure' as a drama of ideas and rightly so. The play is profoundly concerned with certain major intellectual issues. This critic points out that the main themes of the play are Justice and Mercy. Of these themes, that of Justice versus Mercy seems to the readers to be the most important. At the same time, the critic points out that 'Measure for Measure' is also intensely concerned with the nature of authority, the workings of the psyche, and the predicament of man faced with the universal facts of procreation and death. However, these are not the only themes which figure in the play. The mainspring of the action of the play is the sexual instinct. Claudio is sentenced to death for having made his beloved Juliet pregnant without having married her. Angelo, who has sentenced Claudio to death, himself soon afterwards discovers the force of sexual impulse. Most of the lesser characters seem to have no other occupations and few other topics of conversation but sex.

Titus Andronicus

'Titus Andronicus' illustrates a vicious clash of two cultures, and from the dating of 1593 presented by Jonathon Bate is almost certainly the playwright's earliest attempt to represent Roman culture; Francis Barker writes: "Judging from the early incidence of human sacrifice or from the prominence that it gives to an act of cannibalism, it could be argued that *Titus Andronicus* represents Rome as a primitive society". This illustration, in a setting where permissible influence becomes gradually more fraught, arises to what is by a significant margin Shakespeare's most violent play, and an explicit analysis of the clash between the Self and Other. Molly Easo Smith disputes that the play construes what Smith illustrates as the 'polarities' scrutinized by the play are in more realistic terms two groups, Romans, Self and Goths, and Other, carrying out tremendous acts of brutality upon one another, especially in the name of tradition, vengeance and honor. The continued and ghoulish violence depicted became the main point for early important explanation of the play, efficiently becoming the defining constituent by which the play was recognized and judged.

Merchant of Venice

In the play, “The Merchant Venice”, the anti-Semitic sentiment of the late 14th century European societies is vividly evident in Shakespeare’s portrayal of Shylock. Indeed the objective portrayal of the contemporary society has enabled Shakespeare to look into the true place of the Jews in the European Christian society. Like Shylock, the Jews had to live their lives of socially outcasts. Yet if the only character that draws the sympathy of the audience’s sympathy is Shylock. A school of critics argue that “*The Merchant of Venice*” is an “anti-Semitic work -- an understandable reaction in a post-Holocaust era” (2). But in a study, Jami Rogers contends that “Shakespeare, however, did not write a one-dimensional villain, but a complex character who defies explanation and who will probably never be fully understood” (1).

Theaters of Shakespeare’s society had a long tradition of portraying the Jews in as greedy, usurer, and Machiavellian. But Shakespeare indiscernibly appends a new humanizing tone to his contemporary trend of Judaic portrayal that upholds a Jew character as melodramatic. Not disheartening the audience who were accustomed to view the Jews as the biblical traitors of Jesus, Shakespeare has frequently has drawn their attention to the inhuman part of his society’s attitude and behaviors towards them both in Shylock’s own word and in the plot construction of the play. Following the long cherished tradition of the theaters of his era, Shakespeare has characterized Shylock as a typical villain who is even convicted with the intention of murder.

At some points Shylock can be considered as the reflection of his society’s antagonism towards him. Though inhumanly behavior of the society towards Shylock becomes outweighed by the biblical allusion of a Jew traitor hungry for a Christian’s blood, the audience is frequently reminded of the fact that Shylock is the most oppressed victim of the society’s injustice. As a part of this reminder, Shakespeare makes Shylock speak in support of the Jews humanly existence in spite of the cultural and racial difference:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is?

Shakespeare shows that a man like, continually facing his fellow people's hatred and, antagonistic and humiliating behavior like spitting, stoning, etc reaches the breaking point. Moreover, his daughter's elopement with one of those Christian's spatters is a further shocking blow on the old man's nerve. Therefore, the bond signed by Antonio is essentially the only means to take revenge on one of those hatred spitting Christians. Indeed Shylock's hatred for Antonio is ultimately the reflection of what he receives from the Christian society, as he acknowledges it in the line:

If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrongs a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrongs a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

In this soliloquy, Shylock vows to return what he gets from the society. He clearly indicates the underlying antagonism and hatred of the culture and society in which he lives. The unfathomable hatred he bears for Antonio is clearly evident in his intention to take one pound of flesh. Being asked for having mercy on Antonio, he openly admits his hatred: "So can I give no reason, nor I will not, /More than a lodged hate and a certain loathing/I bear Antonio, that I follow thus/A losing suit against him. Are you answered?" (IV.i.43–61) In the preceding lines of this speech of Shylock shows the convulsion of hi of his anger he cannot even express his reasoning why he wants to kill Antonio. Simply the words, "gaping pig" (IV.i.53) and the "woolen bagpipe" (IV.i.55) are indicative of his choking hatred for Antonio.

Taming of the Shrew

A most important theme of 'The Taming of the Shrew' is the unmasking of fake appearances to reveal the person's factual nature. Clothing and disguises are significant to this play. Substantial disguises are essential to flatter Bianca, because her father announces that his daughters must have teachers, so the men, even the student Lucentio, present themselves as teachers. Petruchio, the only suitor is, does not don a physical camouflage, though he dresses up for his marriage so his wife will realize that "to me she's married, not unto my clothes." (Act 3, scene 2). It is apparent that natives in Padua do judge one another by their superficial

appearances. Tranio, Lucentio's servant, is able to imitate his master simply by changing clothes with him, though he remains a servant from the beginning to end. Tranio senses that Petruchio, when he comes out as a ragged clown for his wedding, intends to teach his wife a lesson: he "hath some meaning in his mad attire" (act 3, scene 2).

Hamlet

Shakespeare's "Hamlet" seems to be the most appealing because it echoes the existential agony of a modern mind through the inner conflict of Hamlet. It is the story of a young man, Hamlet's revenge of his father's death. It is the most celebrated of Shakespeare's play not only for its historical value but also for its thematic significance. In it much of the hideousness and nobility of human existence is revealed with Shakespeare's literary craftsmanship. In it, the author explores the clandestine corner of human mind. Throughout the play a question prevails: "What is the meaning of Life?" Again this absurdity of human existence is vividly evident in Hamlet's speech, "To be or not to be! That is the question / whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer / the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune..." (Shakespeare, Hamlet). Indeed Hamlet's melancholy is modernistic by nature. It is somewhat like Albert Camus' absurdity. Like the absurdity of Camus's *Stranger*, Hamlet also loses all the meanings of life after the murder of his father. His mother's hurried marriage and his father's ghost as well as his duty of ensuring justice imposed upon him to a melancholic absurdity of life and deprive him of his balance of mind. He becomes depressed and disgusted with life. The world seems to him "weary, state, flat, and unprofitable." Love is no longer, as Bradley says "an absorbing passion, it does no longer occupy his thoughts" (Bradley 45)

Hamlet is Essentially the Victim of his own Deception: A Critical Approach

'Deception' is one of the dominant themes, in Shakespeare's play, "Hamlet", that serve as the baseline of the plot of the drama, while shaping its central character. Hamlet despises deception, and craves for truth and honesty more than most other characters do in the play. Ironically Hamlet himself resorts to deceptions and lies in order to discover the truth about the regicide, and, in the long run, he himself is ensnared in his own lie and deception. But Hamlet's

deception essentially can be acquitted of the charge being a crime. Indeed it is more of a strategy, on Hamlet's part, in the cold war with Claudius, than an intentional crime that inflicts pain on the innocent. From a plain view, Hamlet's deceptive actions are justifiable from a Machiavellian perspective. It is Hamlet's situation that compels him to choose the path, of deception and lies, which is supposed to lead him to the ultimate truth of his father's death. Indeed Hamlet is in a situational irony that forces him to assume those deceptive roles.

Literally Hamlet is trapped in his own deception since his deceptive role forces him to refrain from being committed to Ophelia's love, to kill Polonius accidentally, and eventually to lose Ophelia. Since his semi-maniacal behaviors grow suspicion among Claudius and other people of authority, he can be held responsible for the accidental killing of Polonius who attempts to spy on him. For the same reason, he is responsible for making Laertes his enemy and for his own death at Laertes's hand. But a deeper analysis of Hamlet's character is more likely to raise the question whether Hamlet is right enough to assume that Claudius is the murderer of the late King. Hamlet's presupposition of Claudius as the murderer primarily depends on the ghost's assertion that he himself doubts. Hamlet also cannot provide any solid evidences to support his proof.

There are only two signs in the play that show that Claudius might have killed the king. They are not strong enough to prove that Claudius is guilty. The first one is that Claudius runs away in fear, according to Hamlet's expectation, while watching "the Murder of Gonzago". Such case does not essentially prove that Claudius is the murderer, since there may a number of reasons that provokes him to do so. The most appealing one is: the part of the mimic play that has been staged by Hamlet, directly deals illegal-love between Gonzago's wife and his murderer. Indeed such presentation is humiliating for a king who has married his mysteriously dead brother's wife, even though he is not guilty of the murder. There is another possible reason: Claudius is mentally so weak that he cannot but avoid the fratricide of the play. Claudius's psychological weakness is evident in the one and only following set of lines in the whole play:

.....Pray can I not,
 Though inclination be as sharp as will:
 My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent; (3.3.21)

The emotionally swept audience most likely mistakes Claudius's repentance for his murder, when they hear Claudius to say, "O, my offence is rank it smells to heaven; / It hath the primal eldest curse upon't, / A brother's murder" (3.3.18). But there is another possibility that Claudius has fully perceived the foulness of his incestuous love for his brother's wife after viewing Hamlet's play; therefore, he comparing it with fratricide, with a wish to relieve himself from his past:

.....What if this cursed hand
 Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
 Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
 To wash it white as snow? (3.3.23)

Now the question that arises here is why Claudius attempts to kill Hamlet, if he is not guilty of the murder. The most reasoning answer is that after Hamlet kills Polonius, Claudius must feel the risk of life and he normally will try to get relief from him, even though he is not guilty of the murder.

Conclusion

Shakespeare's focus on the inner reality or the reality of a person's being is all the same for the people of all ages, though often remains cloaked under the mask of a society's rules, regulations, rituals and code of manners. While watching his plays, the audiences oft-repeatedly encounter them only to be thrilled and aligned themselves with the characters of the play. Now-a-days, while modern people's existence is under the constant threat of scientific villainy, decline of religious belief, the destruction of wars and strife, decay of so-called religion-based identity, they are moved by the blatant exposure of the 'reality' of being before their eyes in Shakespeare's plays. Apparently Shakespeare's portrayal of Shylock as a social outcast and a ridiculous figure seems to be the violation of an author's commitment to uphold the objective

reality. But in reality, Shakespeare was fully aware of the socioeconomic condition of the Jews in his society. But at the same time, as a man of theatre, he was also aware of the demand of the audience of his era and had to portray Shylock as ridiculing as they expected. Therefore, Shylock has not gained the qualities of a tragic figure like other Shakespearean tragic heroes such as King Lear, Hamlet, Macbeth, etc.

Bibliography:

Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. Boston: Blackwell. 2005

Essay-911. *Existentialism in Hamlet*, Web. 14 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.essay-911.com/samples/Existentialism.htm> >

Johnson, Samuel. *Preface to Shakespeare*. Web. 14 Dec. 2013.

<<http://www.scribd.com/doc/897546/Preface-to-Shakespeare-by-Samuel-Johnson>>

Rogers, Jami. *Shylock and History*, Web. 14 Dec. 2013.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/merchant/ei_shylock.html>

Shakespeare, William. *Merchant of Venice*. New York: Penguin Classics. 1998

Shakespeare, William. *Measure for Measure*. New York: Penguin. 2006

Shakespeare, William. *Taming of the Shrew*. New York: Penguin. 2006

Shakespeare, William. *Titus Andronicus*. New York: Penguin. 2006

Shakespeare, William. *Troilus and Cressida*. New York: Penguin. 2006

Works Cited:

Shakespeare, William. *Merchant of Venice*. New York: Penguin Classics. 1998

Shakespeare, William. *Measure for Measure*. New York: Penguin. 2006

Shakespeare, William. *Taming of the Shrew*. New York: Penguin. 2006

Shakespeare, William. *Titus Andronicus*. New York: Penguin. 2006

Shakespeare, William. *Troilus and Cressida*. New York: Penguin. 2006

