
UNIT 6: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: LIFE AND WORKS

UNIT STRUCTURE

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6.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- discuss briefly the life and works of Shakespeare
- make a quick survey of the kind of plays and poetry written by the bard
- explain the causes behind Shakespeare's unprecedented popularity as an English playwright
- provide a critical reception of Shakespeare

6.2 INTRODUCTION

This is the first unit of the Block, which is dedicated entirely to Shakespeare, and a few of his plays. There cannot be an iota of doubt that the world is yet to produce a playwright with the kind of overwhelming greatness and influence of Shakespeare. There is perhaps no area of human concern that has not been explored and creatively exploited in his plays. Goethe best describes the influence of Shakespeare on him when he says: "I do not remember that any book or person or event in my life ever made so great an impression upon me as the plays of Shakespeare." In fact, his appeal is so universal that we can safely conclude with Ben Jonson that

“He was not of an age, but for all time!” In what follows, you will be able to learn about the life and works of Shakespeare in detail, which shall further help you to discuss the prescribed plays of Shakespeare in the following units in a more meaningful way.

6.3 WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: LIFE AND WORKS

Although birth and death dates were not recorded in Shakespeare’s time, the churches did record baptisms and burials, usually a few days after the actual event. According to the records of Holy Trinity Church, the Parish Church of Stratford, infant William was baptised on April 26, 1564. As it was usually the custom to baptise children on the third day after birth, it is generally accepted that Shakespeare was born on April 23, 1564. Moreover, it is also evident from the inscription upon his monument that on April 23, 1616, he had already begun his fifty-third year. While his father, John Shakespeare was a farmer’s son from a village close to Stratford called Snitterfield, his mother Mary Arden was the daughter of a prosperous farmer who descended from an old Warwickshire family of mixed Anglo-Saxon and Norman blood. Being the youngest daughter of the family, she inherited much of her father’s landowning and farming estate when he died. John was by occupation a dealer in agricultural commodities. He also served the Stratford government in various capacities as a member of the Council, Chamberlain, Alderman and finally high Bailiff, which is the equivalent of town mayor. The family lived in Henley Street, Stratford, with John having earned for himself both fortune and fame. However, around 1577, when William was in his early teens, his father’s fortunes began to decrease due to growing debt. Although his fortunes and respect were restored, several years of debt and lawsuits proved terribly distressing for the family. This also explains the reason why William could not proceed for university education of any kind. Not much is known about the education of William Shakespeare except that he attended the free grammar school at Stratford



where he learnt his Latin and Classical Greek. It is also not known as to how long he attended the school. However, the Grammar school proved to be of immense benefit to Shakespeare. For not only did it mark the beginning of his career but, almost everything he seemed to have mastered was learnt by him there. However, he had to leave the Grammar School when he was about fourteen years old to extend financial support to the family. Yet what occupation he pursued exactly for the next couple of years is a matter of conjecture. It is alleged on the basis of evidence available in his plays that he served as a country schoolmaster and a lawyer's clerk.

His Works:

However, it is generally accepted that Shakespeare arrived in London around 1588 and began to establish himself as an actor and playwright. He emerged successful as a playwright quite early and even aroused the jealousy of as reputed and established a playwright as Robert Greene, who termed him, "...an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers..." in a pamphlet called "A Groat's Worth of Wit Bought with a Million of Repentance" in 1592. In any case, Shakespeare's career began to flourish and several of his plays were performed by an acting company called PEMBROKE'S MEN for whom perhaps he also acted. Shakespeare also acted for various other acting companies like ADMIRAL'S MEN, DERBY'S MEN', LEICESTER'S MEN, but the company he was most closely associated with was the Chamberlain's Men (known as KING'S MEN after the accession of King James I in 1603).

The years 1594-1599 however turned out to be most productive for him. For not only did he produce a fairly large number of successful plays and some of his best poems, including his *Venus and Adonis* and *Rape of Lucrece* in 1599, he also became part owner of the most prestigious public playhouse in London, the Globe. Subsequently, Chamberlain's Men became the most popular acting company in London, being invited to perform at court far more often than any other group. Shakespeare himself must have done a great deal of acting. Indeed, he became so popular that he had his plays published and sold in octavo editions, or "penny-copies" to the more literate section of his audiences. Perhaps, Shakespeare's last work before



Chamberlain: An official who used to look after the home and servants of a king, queen or an important family in the past.



1. Ann Hathaway whom Shakespeare married in 1582 was eight years older than her husband.
2. On June 29, 1613 the Globe Theatre was burned down by a canon fire during a performance of *Henry VIII*. It was, however, rebuilt within a year by a carpenter named Peter Rose.

he retired was *The Tempest*, possibly based on the disappearance of an English ship in 1609. It was believed that the shipwreck had killed all on board but strangely enough, all the sailors returned home after a year.

Yet his success and popularity notwithstanding, Shakespeare decided to settle for the comfortable life of a country gentleman and around the year 1611, he left London for his permanent retirement to Stratford, leaving aside his dramatic career. However, he did not live for long, and five years after his retirement to Stratford, he died on his birthday, April 23, 1616. He was buried in the chancel of Holy Trinity Church on April 25, 1616.

The great body of work constituting Shakespeare's legacy is indeed so vast that it is not likely to be matched by any other writer of any civilization, in the past, present or future. Both his poems and plays continue to inspire and influence generations with a degree of awe and charm that makes him a truly universal figure for all times. As has been stated already, Shakespeare authored 37 plays, 154 sonnets and 2 long poems, "Venus and Adonis" and "The Rape of Lucrece".

Shakespeare's **tragedies**, about **ten** in number, were mostly inspired by his reading of *Lives* by Plutarch, the Greek historian and essayist and *Chronicles* of Raphael Holinshed. Some of these plays, again, were reworking of previous stories based on English or Roman history. Similarly, the *Histories*, a genre, presumably created by the Bard himself are an attempt to dramatise the lives, the rule and times of English Kings from King John to Henry VIII. His **comedies**, about **seventeen** in number, are often divided into subclasses like 'early comedies', 'middle comedies', 'problem plays', 'dark comedies', 'romances', etc. reflecting – the playwright's development with the passage of time. While the early comedies at times betray his inexperience, his later comedies, accompanied by serious intent, show a mastery unequalled by any of his contemporaries.

Coming to his one hundred and fifty four sonnets, it is seen that the first 126 sonnets are addressed to a young man, and the rest to a dark lady. Of course, the identity of "Mr W.H", the young man to whom the sonnets are dedicated is also debatable. For, if "W.H.", for most scholars, stands for the initials of William Herbert, the third earl of Pembroke, there are others

who would have us believe that the letters could be a reversal of Henry Wrothesly's initials. However, whatever be the private motivation that had gone into the making of the sonnets, there can be no doubt that the sonnets give us the impression of being the product of a mind with extraordinary poetic sensibility and calibre.

Now let us have a discussion on Shakespeare's works in more detail. As the stage was well set, William Shakespeare made grand entry, perhaps for the best ever. He raised the English drama to a height of envy and grandeur. Having penned down thirty-seven (37) plays spanning over a period of some twenty-four years of his writing career, Shakespeare proved his acumen as a dramatist par excellence, and became an institution himself. Any serious consideration into his writing would bring out the fact that he started his career with history plays trumpeting the glory of the nation and unconditional praise for the dynasty. As his plays were intended for performance, and not for publication, he always sought to cater to the taste of people. Taking a close look at the growing nationalist sentiment that owed much to the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 or exploration of new geographical locations along English ethos and cultural ambience under the stewardship of Richard Hakluyt, Sir Francis Drake or Sir Walter Raleigh, he framed his ideas conforming to this and wrote plays accordingly. However, writing down the history plays, he was more concerned with examining the historical personalities with their virtues and vices. His hidden agenda was to bring those personalities within the reach of common people. The strategy made the characters more lively and vibrant. Of course, the Renaissance ideal of concentrating on the life of an individual had its role in this regard too. The idea in his history plays is not that of hero-worship, rather of humanising and examining a hero or monarch.

In course of time, Shakespeare broadened his horizon, and serious consideration into human life oriented his writing mechanism. As opposed to the early plays in connection with their being light and fanciful, most of the plays produced in this phase are more insightful and powerful. The strength he showed in characterisation and treatment of subject matter opened up a new chapter in the English drama. All the plays including *Richard*

III, King John, The Merchant of Venice, As You Like It, Twelfth Night, to mention a few, document Shakespeare as a mature artist whose light-heartedness as noticed in his early dramatic pursuits dried out and made room for the more serious and realistic formulations. With this, he gave vent to personal sorrow and philosophical contemplation in the plays. As he experienced the worst, with his son and father dying, and friend deserting, his pen sketched the most vibrant plays that were highly accepted by the public. The period seemed to be a real beauty since everything was viewed through the lens of a shrewd eye that strove to find out the mystery of evil and sorrow affecting human life.

Given tragic dimension as an inseparable part of life, his plays, mostly tragedies, seek to unfold the root cause as it impinges untold suffering on human beings. Keeping this in view, his *Julius Caesar, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, Antony and Cleopatra*, among others, are incredible editions to his creative genius. However, despite the darker side to these plays, there is something positive, bright, not completely missing. Of course, the overdose of tragic elements affects the good and noble, often in infinite measure. However, the ultimatum is not of the evil and bad. Another significant proposition in Shakespeare's endeavour at unveiling the mystery of evil and bad is that the king, traditionally accorded the closest position to God, could be an embodiment of evil as well. The proposition seems dangerous since it raises possibility of removing and replacing the king or the ruler and taking hold of the position by other agency. This is a recurring theme in most of his plays such as *Richard III, Julius Caesar, Hamlet, King Lear, Macbeth, and Coriolanus*. Moreover, love, ambition, power, death, authority are some of the abstracts that have great role to play in bringing out the evil and bad affecting all concerned.

Giving a vent to the personal experience that Shakespeare had, especially at a time conditioned largely by Senecan influence, he appeared at his level best in this distinctive form. Under Seneca's wide-ranging impact, he seemed to have found out a new dimension to the tragic downfall of people and orchestrated his writing in consonant with such an approach. Of course, Thomas Kyd's faithful adherence to the Senecan heritage equally

fabricated Shakespeare's concept of tragedy with no less vigour and enthusiasm. In addition, Aristotle's *Poetics*, heavily drawn upon theorising the drama, most strikingly tragedy, was equally elemental to the formation of Shakespeare's powerful concept of tragedy. Although he did not follow Aristotle wholeheartedly as he frequently diverted from the Classical Unities of Time, Place and Action in his plays, most of the basic observations by the Greek genius found an easy access to his writing skill.

As a faithful heir to the revenge tradition of Seneca, Shakespeare's early tragedies including *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Hamlet* are accomplished works in this direction. What Shakespeare concentrated upon was the tragic downfall of protagonists, a development that unflinchingly owed to terrible weakness or error of judgment on the part of the sufferers. Its effect is so strong that the sufferers can do nothing substantial, but to endure and face the consequences. In the eye of Shakespeare, individuals are primarily responsible for their downfall. They are the real architects of the seemingly all powerful 'Destiny'. The Renaissance ideal of an individual being the central factor of everything seemed to have come out handy for Shakespeare in analysing the cause and effect of suffering or tragic overtones in one's life. Although the good and evil carry out their presence in his plays, particularly in tragedies, it is the evil that has been worthily punished. The evil cannot go scot free, but the good and noble also get punishment in the process. At the site of the good being punished or receiving pain at the hands of the evil, readers are moved. Indeed, destruction of the good seems to be a design framed by the dramatist perhaps with a view to inculcating the touch of tragedy in the creations.

Thus, you have seen that was Shakespeare the English poet, playwright and actor is regarded as one of the greatest writers in the English language and the world's pre-eminent dramatist. He is also known as England's National Poet and the "Bard of Avon." His plays have been translated into every major existing language and are performed more often than those of any other playwrights.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q 1: What did Robert Greene call Shakespeare?

Q2: Name the important sources utilised by Shakespeare for his tragedies?

Q 3: How do Shakespeare's history plays connect with Renaissance Individualism?

Q 4: How come Shakespeare could have a powerful concept of tragedy?

6.4 A QUICK VIEW AT SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES

In this section, we shall have a look at the three tragedies other than *King Lear*.

You should note that all his tragedies such as *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* seem to be experimental in nature since Shakespeare took up pains at analysing the tragic dimension in life from various standpoints. For instance, his major work, *Hamlet* (1600-01), belonged as it is to revenge tradition, draws upon the principle that one's procrastination or frequent postponement of action leads to complicity, often tragic downfall as well. If someone does not have the urge to do something, there is no question of experiencing the ebb and flow in life. However, it does not hold good to a person who wants to do something substantial, and fails to accomplish the design in due course of time. Hamlet's prime objective of taking revenge upon his uncle, Claudius gets delayed with the former searching for sound opportunity that is appropriate to the action. As the intensity of avenging the guilt of his uncle is delayed, he turns out more restless and fails to continue life as usual. The misdeeds of Claudius, viz. murdering Hamlet's father and marrying his mother, weigh so high on his psyche that he loses the sanity of mind and goes almost mad. Of course, his madness is feigned to some extent since it is in this guise that he would like to hide his real intention from others, especially Claudius. However, Claudius is not utterly convinced by Hamlet's affectation, and he finds him as a real threat and uses Laertes to kill him. Here Claudius' stance could be

viewed as a typical Renaissance ideal that remains ever ready to do anything to overpower any possible threat. As the society is replete with cruelty, hypocrisy, betrayal, and other inhuman qualities, Hamlet's idealised world is shattered, and he finds it hard to take anybody into confidence. Even Horatio, his most trusted friend fails to uphold friendliness with him. This relates to the breakdown of ethos in the set up Hamlet is placed upon. However, all this could be overcome if someone does have the strength of mind and character, and takes up prompt action when required. This is something quite missing from Hamlet, who is more considerate towards perception, rather than action. For this, he faces the punishment, though successful in taking revenge upon Claudius. The evil is punished, but the good is not left unhurt. Another important thing to be noticed in the play is that a person of action is the need of time, and that is what Shakespeare has done with Fortinbras, Prince of Norway, making the King of Denmark.

With the success scaling through *Hamlet*, Shakespeare proceeded towards *Othello* (1603-04) as a sequence to the revenge tradition. If Hamlet's tragedy occurs primarily because of his speculative and procrastinating mind set, that of Othello and Desdemona is materialised by a sexual trickery hatched by Iago. Here Othello's weakness is that he fails utterly to comprehend Iago's villainy, and acts under the pall of jealousy and brutality. As he is a Moor, he justifies his position by appearing as an inexperienced and self-distrustful person. Although Iago appears as a true 'Machiavellian' villain, a development gaining momentum in the Renaissance, he cuts himself as resolute and firm character, a person of action. The illicit love relationship between Desdemona and Cassio, falsely implicated as it has been, showcases Iago's powerful, indeed successful, manipulation of situation to his use and interest. However, all this might not have yielded the result as such, provided Othello had acted sense and logic. He is more at the emotional level, and acts accordingly. It is true that his emotional act unfailingly costs much damage in the play, but it also points out the intensity of love he possesses for Desdemona. Here she turns out a victim since she hardly knows the complicity of action, but ironically gets punishment in the war between Iago and Othello. Her innocence is rewarded with a

punishment, and that is so because of two male characters. Hence, a question mark could be raised about the treatment meted out to a woman in the vortex of an Iago-dominated condition. However, this could not be taken as an ultimate and well-acceptable dimension considering Iago's rage and his single-minded work plan to destroy Othello at any cost. It does not matter whether there is Desdemona or any other person in that position. His sole motif is to bring an end to Othello, and there is no second thought to this.

With *Macbeth* (1606), Shakespeare achieved the milestone he intended in the field of tragedy. It was none other than T.S. Eliot, who viewed the play as the highest feat of artistic excellence. Both form and content have been so dexterously accomplished that the play could be a real eye-opener for any writer aspiring for the best ever. Although Eliot did have a hidden agenda in his criticism, viz. to justify his theory of "Objective Correlative", Shakespeare's mastery in the play may not be ruled out. Here the dramatist deals with the greed of power, and how it leads to destruction and loss of peace in life. As in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* also introduces supernatural elements acting inseparably in the life of people. Perhaps Shakespeare was considerate towards the interest of King James I in witchcraft and of the people. Whatever it may be, the witches and the prophecy they make do have a far-reaching impact on the course of action that Macbeth pursues. Having learnt that Macbeth would be the king, Lady Macbeth becomes more ambitious and persuades him to accomplish the mission at any cost. It is true that King Duncan's murder has paved the way for Macbeth, but the act equally brings into effect the loss of refreshment and renewal in life. The sense of guilt is so strong that both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth could hardly make themselves free of. As such the utterance—"What, will these hands ne'er be clean"—by Lady Macbeth in the sleepwalking scene displays the mental agony and prick of conscience they are passing through. The most striking feature in the play is that readers hardly keep the villainy of Macbeth and her ambitious wife; rather they maintain a sympathetic attitude towards them. Their agony and loss of sanity of the mind act as an emotional bond with the readers. Perhaps their repentance gives rise to

forgiveness for others and it defies the tag of the malcontent. Besides, Macbeth's misdeeds are the result of his ignorance and an unexamined ambition. If Othello's tragic downfall owes to his innocence Macbeth has to do with his ignorance.

6.5 CRITICAL RECEPTION OF SHAKESPEARE

[adapted from Wikipedia]

During his lifetime, Shakespeare was rated as one among many talented playwrights and poets. However, since the late 17th century, was considered the supreme playwright and poet of the English language. Till date, no other dramatist has been performed so often on the world stage as Shakespeare. Besides, the plays have often been being adapted in performance. So great was his influence that during the 18th and 19th centuries, to be a star on the British stage was synonymous with being a great Shakespearean actor. Then, the emphasis was placed on the soliloquies as declamatory turns at the expense of pace and action, and Shakespeare's plays seemed in peril of disappearing beneath the added music, scenery, and special effects produced by thunder, lightning, and wave machines. Editors and critics of the plays, disdaining the showiness and melodrama of Shakespearean stage representation, began to focus on Shakespeare as a dramatic poet, to be studied on the printed page rather than in the theatre.

The rift between Shakespeare on the stage and Shakespeare on the page was at its widest in the early 19th century, at a time when both forms of Shakespeare were hitting peaks of fame and popularity. Theatrical Shakespeare was successful due to spectacle and melodrama for the masses, while book or closet drama Shakespeare was being elevated by the reverential commentary of the Romantics into unique poetic genius, prophet, and bard. Before the Romantics, Shakespeare was simply the most admired of all dramatic poets, especially for his insight into human nature and his realism, but Romantic critics such as Coleridge made him an object of almost religious adoration, Bernard Shaw later coining the term "bardolatry" to describe it. These critics regarded Shakespeare as

towering above other writers, and regarding his plays not as “merely great works of art” but as “phenomena of nature, like the sun and the sea, the stars and the flowers” and “with entire submission of our own faculties” as mentioned by Thomas De Quincy. To the later 19th century, Shakespeare became in addition an emblem of national pride, the crown jewel of English culture.



6.6 LET US SUM UP

From this unit, you have learnt that the world is yet to produce a playwright with the kind of overwhelming greatness and influence of Shakespeare, which is mainly because there is perhaps no area of human concern that has not been explored and creatively exploited in his plays. Shakespeare authored thirty-seven plays, one hundred and fifty four sonnets and two long poems, “Venus and Adonis” and “The Rape of Lucrece”. Shakespeare’s tragedies were mostly inspired by his reading of *Lives* by Plutarch, and *Chronicles* of Raphael Holinshed. Some of these plays, again, were reworking of previous stories based on English or Roman history. Similarly, his History Plays dramatise the lives, the rule and times of English Kings from King John to Henry VIII. His comedies reflect the playwright’s development with the passage of time. It is expected that your knowledge about the life and works as well as the critical reception of Shakespeare shall help you to read the following units more engagingly.



6.7 FURTHER READING

Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth*. London: Macmillan and Co. ; London and New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1905.

Greenblatt, Stephen. *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.