



Spectrum of Shakespeare's Universal Appeal: An Exploration

Abstract

Shakespeare rightfully claims immortality as his literature transcends time and place. His tremendous influence is seen on the world today in numerous ways. Through the translations, adaptations, television serials and films, he has reached every corner of the earth. He has become a point of reference in the evolution of the English language; a milestone in literature for the future generations; a representative penman of the English Renaissance. He has heavily influenced the culture, society, theatre and education.

It is mind-boggling to notice his wide-spanning influence extending to the present day world because, without his knowledge, he has originated some spiritual movements, taught war strategies, authenticated romantic practices and shaped the very core of our moral codes. His impact endures not only in the way we express ourselves, but also in the way we think, experience and process the world around us.

This paper seeks to present the range of the bard's far-reaching and ever-lasting influence. It can be vividly seen on renaissance, language, literature, culture, theater, theories, management studies, films, television serials, games and advertisements etc.

Key words: *Shakespeare, influence*

Introduction

Shakespeare rightfully claims immortality as his literature transcends time and place. Each generation across the globe finds him to be its contemporary. His tremendous influence is seen on the world today in numerous ways. Through the translations, adaptations, television serials and films, he has reached every corner of the earth. He has been a brand for ages. He has become a point of reference in the evolution of the English language; a milestone in literature for the future generations; a representative penman of the English Renaissance. He has heavily influenced the culture, society, theatre and education.

His essential themes and complex ever-evolving characters have universal appeal. His depiction of human psychology is mind-blowing. The human conditions presented by him never change from century to century or country to country, despite all the differences in knowledge, culture and priorities. The most important reason for his global appeal is that he was a great story-teller and human beings love stories instinctively. His plays are extremely receptive and allow endless reinterpretations. This natural adaptability of the plays has made them such sturdy travellers over time and space.

His use of new words, phrases and structures is happily hailed by the future generations. His spirit of experimentation is fascinating. He courageously plays with the language, form and techniques in order to bring home his ideas.

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Stephen Marche observes that Shakespeare has “been the unwitting founder of intellectual movements he would never have endorsed and the secret presence behind spiritual practices he could

never have imagined. He has been used as a crude political instrument by all sides in conflicts of which he could never have conceived. His vision has been assumed by saints and by murderers. At the bottom of all these slippery chains of consequences and perverted manifestations of his talent dwells the unique ability of Shakespeare to place his finger on people's souls."¹

This paper seeks to present the range of the bard's far-reaching and ever-lasting influence.

(1) Renaissance

The Renaissance arrived in England by late 15th century. It reached its climax during the Elizabethan era. Shakespeare's influence is clearly seen on the Renaissance: he standardized the English language, expended its vocabulary and intensified the humanity of his characters using the complexity of emotions. He also utilized elaborate references of Greek and Roman mythology. His awareness about the nuances of language, characterization and plot construction has become exemplary for future generations of writers.

Shakespeare brought the Renaissance freedom and humanity to the English theater. He added complexity to the language by creating new words and expressions in order to make it a precise artistic instrument. Before his age, soliloquies had been used to convey information. But Shakespeare internalized the monologues and caused them to bring out the emotional depth of his characters.

Shakespeare defined 'self' in new ways by identifying personal subjective human experience. He did not simply reflect a new kind of self-awareness; he fostered it by making his characters exist in isolation. The protagonists and villains of his tragedies exemplify the same.

Shakespeare devised a distinctly 'English' version of the Renaissance. Alana Shilling rightly comments: "Shakespeare arguably invented a uniquely English version of the Renaissance, for he wove together the plots of ancient tragedies with the histories of medieval England so masterfully that it was difficult to disentangle them. Moreover, Shakespeare imbued some of his characters with a distinctly 'medieval' way of reasoning. By making such logic seem antiquated, Shakespeare defined Renaissance modes of thought – and their distance from the medieval past – more persuasively."¹¹

He popularized the Renaissance. In the Elizabethan age, his plays were not performed for the selective courts of kings. Instead, his popular plays sounding like high cultural marks today were ways of making otherwise inaccessible cultural experiences available to relative commoners. Thus, he made the Renaissance accessible to a large audience.

He is the supreme creation of Renaissance humanism. He had a profound understanding of humanity; a mysterious ability for self-expression and tremendous guts for practicing the ideals of intellectual freedom.

(2) Language

During the time of Shakespeare, the English language was undergoing a major metamorphosis. Shakespeare brought a turning point in the evolution of the English Language. He identified the potential of his mother tongue and experimented with all kinds of innovations, dialectical adaptations and archaisms which enriched the language in turn. His influence on the English language runs deep. The Oxford English Dictionary often identifies Shakespeare as the sole user or first user of a word or phrase.

Approximately 1700 of the commonly used words have been given by him. He re-designed nouns into verbs and verbs into adjectives. He combined words which were never used together before. Using prefixes and suffixes, he generated completely original words. He also created new words by anglicising vocabulary from foreign languages. His vocabulary has enriched the language by making it more colourful and expressive. His neologisms and phrases have the audacity to survive the test of time.

Fiona Hartley correctly notes: "William Shakespeare expressed new ideas and Language play, by inventing, borrowing or adopting a word or a phrase from another language, known as neologising. This allowed new variations for English words. This also meant that whilst Shakespeare was writing, he had endless possibilities to be as creative as he liked."^{III}

There were no standardized rules of English grammar before Shakespeare. But the plays of Shakespeare contributed to the process of regularization of the English language. The literary language gained supremacy in the process toward standardization and descriptive popular speech enriched the literary language.

He coined new words and phrases. He introduced new poetic and grammatical structures. In this way, he extended the horizons of English literature. The English language was spontaneous and loose until Shakespeare imparted style and structure to it. Lack of grammatical rules offered his genius virtually unrestricted license to coin new terms. His genius and passion for language was unrestricted. He did not follow any rules except those of his audiences. He invented his own version of the language to attract and amaze his audiences.

(3) Literature

Shakespeare has influenced not only the common people but also many generations of writers irrespective of place and language. He has set standards for literature. His works have helped setting the model for the evolution of modern plays. He has had more influence on the novel than any novelist. Stephen Marche writes, "The greater the artist, the more he or she was influenced by Shakespeare. Dickens and Keats were more inspired by Shakespeare than anybody, and their familiarity with Shakespeare seems to have made them more original, not less."^{IV}

The phrases from the Shakespearean plays are used as the titles for their novels by many novelists. To name a few: *The Undiscovered Country* by Auther Schnitzer (*Hamlet*), *Something Wicked this Way Comes* by Ray Bradbury (*Macbeth*), *The Dogs of War* by Robert Stone (*Julius Caesar*), *The Winter of our Discontent* by John Steinbeck (*Richard III*), *Bell, Book, and Candle* by John van Druten (*King John*)

Some of the novels inspired by various plays of Shakespeare are – *The Dogs of War* by Frederick Forsyth (*Julius Caesar*), *The Talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith (*Macbeth*), *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley (*King Lear*), *The Black Prince* by Iris Murdoch (*Hamlet*), *Moby-Dick* by Herman Melville (*Macbeth / king Lear*), *The daughter of Time* by Josephine Tey (*Richard III*), *Love in Idleness* by Amanda Craig (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley (*The Tempest*), *Cakes and Ale* by W Somerset Maugham (*Twelfth Night*), *Wise Children* by Angela Carter (*The Taming of the Shrew*).

(4) Culture

Shakespeare's observation of human temperament and individuality, good administration and traits of a leader are very much modern. His characters have become instantly recognizable cultural types. But the recent versions of these characters are drastically different from their Shakespearean 'originals'. These adaptations tell an enlightening story about modern culture. Today, a 'Lady Macbeth' is a ruthless female politician who will do anything to achieve her goal; a 'Hamlet' is more an indecisive over-thinker than a genuinely tormented son; a 'Romeo' is more a constant romancer and womanizer than a faithful lover.

The word 'Shakespearean' has adopted various connotations now. These new meanings are remarkably different from any reference to the Shakespeare plays. The word 'Shakespearean' has become a flexible adjective meaning tragic, great or resounding. It is used with events, people and emotions whether or not they have any genuine significance to Shakespeare. Journalists usually describe the disgrace of a public leader as a 'downfall of Shakespearean proportions'. Marjorie Garber writes in this context: "'Shakespearean' in these contexts means something like 'ironic' or

"astonishing" or "uncannily well plotted." Over time the adjectival form of the playwright's name has become an intensifier, indicating a degree of magnitude, a scale of effect."^v

Shakespeare is considered to be the first 'modern' because he understood the issues of human psychology very well. He has dealt with the inner conflict that drives the fundamental motives and instincts of human beings. He has used soliloquy and interior questioning of a character's conflicted thoughts and intentions to access the inner most recesses of human mind. Often quoted without quotation marks, Shakespeare has become a jargon of modern cultural exchange.

(5) Theatre

Shakespeare has transformed European theatre and worked as a formative force in American theatre too. Theatre has never been the same since the first performance of his plays. He has changed the whole notion of stagecraft by modernizing genre, plot and characterization. Dialogues and expectations of audience behavior have taken a different shape. Because of his poetic genius, the status of popular theatre is elevated. It is appreciated by the scholars as well as the entertainment-seekers.

Carina Jaramillo rightly observes, "No playwright before him could appeal to the masses quite like Shakespeare. Theater up until his time had been uniquely reserved for the wealthy and the educated. With the emergence of Shakespeare's writing came tales that appealed to the masses. His plays were often imbued with universal truths of human existence, rather than acting as mirrors of the privileged life. As a result, the experience of Shakespeare's plays in the theater took a populist turn. Audience members engaged with the events taking place on stage, becoming vocal and often raucous. At times, it may have been difficult to determine which individuals were audience members and which were part of a performing troupe."^{vi}

Shakespeare did not care for the unity of place. Antony and Cleopatra has 42 scenes laid all over the Roman world. He combined the tragic and the comic. Henry IV has serious main plot and comic subplot. He elevated the status of the fools and clowns to the extent that they become the voice the conscience. He cultivated, purified and dignified Falstaff in Henry IV. The supernatural elements are the essential part of his plays. He used them for intensifying the dramatic effect and controlling the action. Three witches in Macbeth and Ariel in The Tempest are the examples.

The enactment of Shakespeare's plays has changed the form and function of musicals. Previously, musicals were placed in between the dramatic scenes to act as breaks from the main action. Presently, they have become integral to the dramatic story. For example: in West Side Story, he uses songs to drive the plot. Shakespeare's genius for dramatic clarity makes his work perfect for opera too.

(6) Theories and -isms

Every movement, approach, theory, -ism, principle, criticism or school that has come into existence after Shakespeare invariably refers to his literature. People in different fields take examples of or from his plays to prove or refute some arguments regarding their theories.

Marjorie Garber notes: "Psychology, sociology, political theory, business, medicine, and law have all welcomed and recognized Shakespeare as the founder, authorizer, and forerunner of important categories and practices in their fields. Case studies based on Shakespearean characters and events form an important part of education and theory in leadership institutes and business schools as well as in the history of psychoanalysis. In this sense Shakespeare has made modern culture, and modern culture returns the favor."^{vii}

(7) Management Studies

Teaching Shakespeare-in-business has become a popular and profitable business. Some business people are the most avid and enthusiastic students of Shakespeare today. Shakespearean wisdom turns modern managers into stars of the business stage. He covers the human dilemmas of leadership

better and more clearly than any other management course. He shows how leaders interact, recognize threats, build consensus and alliances, leverage power and strike up coalitions.

An article placed on IEDP website reads: “From Henry V to Titus Andronicus, Richard III to Anthony and Cleopatra, Hamlet to Macbeth – Shakespeare dissected and mapped the psyches of some of the most complex, dynamic, and fascinating leaders that history and literature have given us. Research from some of the world’s top business schools shows how these highly sophisticated maps of leadership that Shakespeare plotted – can be orientated on contemporary challenges – and help today’s leaders navigate to success.”^{VIII}

The play that has most galvanized business leaders is Henry V. The hero builds a strong and diverse team, creates a smart plan and then motivates his army to execute. He wins against apparently insurmountable odds. This is specifically what a leader needs to do. Henry actually sells a vision when he tells his troops 'We are going to France'. A modern leader also needs to sell a vision. He needs to be as committed and passionate as Henry is. Again, Henry knows how to talk to fools and villains. This is also an important leadership trait.

Shakespeare is the perfect platform for engaged and active learning. His plays are persuasive stories and people learn better through narratives than presentations. The article mentioned above presents one more important observation: ““Every academic, consultant, coach, teacher and parent, understands the power of story. Telling stories is part of human nature and a fundamental way that human beings learn. A story has the potential to bring complex patterns and relationships alive.” Shakespeare’s leaders, often great story-tellers themselves, give us plenty of examples on the art of persuasion, negotiation, crisis management, and of course, in truly energising motivational speaking.”^{IX}

Great leadership goes beyond time. The real life leaders often display several fatal flaws of the most eminent Shakespearean protagonists. Similarly, these leaders can become successful in life if they demonstrate the virtues of the Shakespearean leaders namely charisma, strength of mind, wit, compassion and diplomacy.

(8) Films and Television Serials

Films and TV serials as modern media have given Shakespeare's plays a new lease of life. They introduced the plays to a much wider audience. His plays are equally entertaining in authentic historical performance or in modern interpretation on the stage or in films and television adaptations. He is considered to be the most dominant influence on Hollywood. The reason for this is – depending on the directors’ notions, Shakespeare can be tuned to multiple contexts and purposes as the time demands. His brilliantly polyvalent plots inspire ceaseless adaptations and spin-offs.

An exclusive list of the serials and films based on Shakespeare prepared by the Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division of The Library of Congress can be found here – Source: <https://www.loc.gov/rr/mopic/findaid/Shakespeare.pdf> (Accessed on – 19/4/17)

(9) Games

It would be interesting to see how Shakespeare has shaped the world of gaming. His influence has certainly spread far and wide: video, board, card and tabletop games use the plots of his plays and names of his characters. Some games give a chance to improvise one’s own Shakespearean plays. His plays affect either the whole game or just a part of it. The stories are modified to suit the game. Sometimes, Shakespeare himself appears as an important character.

- Shakespeare in video games: Arden: The World of William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Romeo: Wherefore Art Thou?, Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots, Manhunt 2, Final Fantasy, Caster of Red in Fate Grand/Order, Elsinore, Hamlet, Shaders and Product Placement, The Shakespeare Puzzle in Silent Hill 3

- Shakespeare in card games, board games and tabletop games: Bill Shakespeare is Dead, Council of Verona, Kill Shakespeare, Othello, Shakespeare: The Bard Game, Forsooth!

(10) Advertisements

Shakespeare is more than a man – a symbol of literature and art, a language, an industry and an era in time. The advertising world has used him to their advantage. Shakespeare's potential as a gainful brand for the advertising industry has not stumbled. In fact, it has been everlasting and ubiquitous. He is considered to be a sign of class and elegance in advertising. He is often 'sampled' and 'texted' in forms from advertising to cartoon captions.

Shakespeare has appeared in numerous advertisements for sewing machines, ready-made cloths, cigars, fishing reels, beer, whiskey, cough syrup, cars and mobile phones. Every time a new thing is introduced, Shakespeare is there. It makes this new item right because people believe that a person can do what Shakespeare did.

David Smith writes in one of his articles published in The Guardian: "For advertisers in particular it's a way of showing off your sophistication – if you're smart enough to have brushed up on your Shakespeare, you're smart enough to buy our product. My own favourite is a Ford ad from 1964 called 'Seven Characters in Search of Seven Cars', which suggests that the perfect car for Cleopatra is a Capri. Prospero from The Tempest only gets a Cortina, which sounds a bit of a raw deal."^x

(11) Other Walks of Life

Cosmos: Shakespeare's plays are enormously interesting and impossible to reduce to a simple formula. His reach is cosmic. Confirming his claim on immortality, 25 out of 27 moons of the planet Uranus are named after Shakespearean characters.

Children World: Gnomeo and Juliet is an adaptation of Romeo and Juliet made suitable for the young children by eliminating all the death and suffering. This shows how Shakespeare is also opening up to smaller children.

Conclusion

He is extremely local and immediately universal in his appeal. He is a timeless shape-shifter impossible to be defined specifically. Every generation continues to be in his debt. Jonathan Bate writes in one of his articles published in Daily Telegraph: "The key to Darwin's theory of evolution is the survival of the fittest. Species survive according to their capacity to adapt, to evolve according to environmental circumstances. As with natural selection, the quality that makes a really successful, enduring cultural artefact is its capacity to change in response to new circumstances. Shakespeare's plays, because they are so various and so open to interpretation, so lacking in dogma, have achieved this trick more fully than any other work of the human imagination."^{xi}

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