

Rereading of Shakespearean Heroes and Heroines: A Study

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Abstract: Literature is an artistic expression of profound thoughts, which is replete with spontaneous and intense passions, imaginative ideas and reflective viewpoints of the literary men. It is expressed in such a lucid form as to make it more comprehensible, giving aesthetic pleasure and relief to the mind of the commoner. Literature appeals to us greatly due to essential features including thought, feeling, imagination and beauty of style and form, etc. Be it Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *Hamlet*, *Henry IV Part 1*, and *Twelfth Night*, they have been considered as path-breaking works of literature towards societal transformation. The study of literature, whether it is a play, a tragedy, or a comedy, helps us appreciate other people's points of view. We identify ourselves with the characters involved. Students, as citizens of society, are expected to understand other people's views, concerns, and interests to become good communicators. Literature gives them culture-specific information. This paper highlights the heroes and heroines who marched forward with positive hope instead of shrinking down in gloom. It is hoped that this paper shares and invites valuable insights regarding culture and its impact on our society.

Keywords: Gender, Culture, Society, Protagonists, Human emotions

Introduction

Shakespeare was born on 23rd April 1564 in Stratford – on -Avon, a small village in England. His father, John Shakespeare, was a farmer's son who came to Stratford about 1551 and prospered as a trader. His mother, Mary Arden, belonged to Warwickshire. He went to grammar school at Stratford and learned little Greek and Latin. Shakespeare was self-educated amidst the society and people. It is believed that when his father lost his fortunes, Shakespeare took up various jobs for a while, such as teacher, lawyer's clerk, etc. Shakespeare owned The Globe Theatre and Blackfriars Theatre. The plays of his own company were performed there. The first experimental works of Shakespeare are *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Comedy of Errors*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. His second phase of plays started with the publication of *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Pericles* and *The Tempest* are his last plays. He wrote 154 sonnets, each containing three quatrains and a couplet.

The methodology used is analytical and a deconstructive analysis of the study. The present work is a study of heroes and heroines in Shakespeare plays. The study focuses on the hero and heroine relationship, depicting the condition of Elizabethan-age people.

Discussion

Prospero's fine retrospective narrative to Miranda gives us a glimpse into the early career of the Duke he was. In this narrative, he speaks honestly of himself, for he indicates the true causes of his failure as a ruler. As the Duke of Milan, he enjoyed the highest reputation for dignity and the liberal arts. Still, he made the great mistake of neglecting his prime duty – that of governing his subjects properly. "Rapt in secret studies", he neglected his duties of a ruler. He delegated his powers to his brother, Antonio. Neglect of duty, from whatever cause, is sure to be followed by Nemesis. With age, and the coming on of adversity, the fine flower of Prospero's full nature blossoms and gives forth scent. In his dealings with Ariel, in his relations with Miranda, even in his relation to wrongdoers, he is full of tenderness. His heart overflows with love. His love for Miranda is boundless, and he lives for her alone. It has cheered him in his darkest hours and helped him to endure many a hardship:

*"I have done nothing but in care of thee;
Of thee, my dear one; thee my daughter." (Peter Alexander, Act I, Scene 2, P. 8)*

His address to her is always in tender language; she is lover, darling, dear heart, a rich gift, etc. The proudest, happiest moment of his life was that in which he saw her united in wedlock to the man of her heart. Prospero's natural affection is also shown in his love for his brother. He forgives him even after his treachery. Many passages in the play reveal his love for Lord Gonzalo, whose honour, he says, 'cannot be measured or confined.' He sheds tears of gratitude and joy on meeting him. Even his attitude to Ariel is that of an affectionate father. His affectionateness tends to show that he is not the abstract superhuman being he is sometimes supposed to be. He is human enough to have some weaknesses which make him a real character. His occasional impatience and temporary ebullitions of arbitrary mundane infirmities. He is struck to the quick by wrongs. His equanimity is for a moment disturbed. He himself confesses that he is vexed and that his mind beats. His relations to Caliban reveal this side of his character.

Prospero's character witnesses a development. As a king, when his dukedom was large enough, he was unsuspecting, but after his disillusionment, he is careful and

watchful. As a writer puts it, He is watchful as providence and takes care to guard himself against the possibility of evil. He has learnt of Human nature in its worst forms, and he will no longer trust appearances. That is why "he who, without a thought of evil, gives his power and his revenue into his brother's hands, now puts Ferdinand to the severest test as a trial of his love before entrusting his daughter to him." His sternness and seeming tyranny: Prospero is, however, not all tenderness or weakness. He is stern and relentless as relentless as providence itself. This aspect of his character is possibly a little unpleasing to some. His relations with Caliban might seem nothing short of tyranny. His condemnation of others is based not merely on passion but on judgement. His harshness towards Caliban resulted from the failure of gentler methods; his severity against Ferdinand was exercised in the interests of his daughter "lest too light winning make the prize light." His punishment of Alonso, Sebastian and Antonio is justified by the attainment of the object with which it was inflicted. They are being penitent", says he:

*"The sole drift of my purpose doth extend
 Not a frown further."* (Peter Quince, Act V, Scene 1, p. 25)

His forgiveness: Forgiveness is at the root of Prospero's view of life. His last word on life is

*"The rarer action is
 In virtue than in vengeance".* (Peter Alexander, Act V, Scene 1, P.26)

Prospero as the providence of the play: He has been happily called a kind of subordinate providence of the play. From first to last, he controls and manages the whole business of the play. The storm and the shipwreck of the first scene are of his contriving. The meeting of the lovers, who at the first sight change eyes, the conspiracy of Antonio and Sebastian and its frustration, the burlesque conspiracy of Caliban and his poetry, and ultimately the greatest reconciliation and recognition all these are the magician's making. But it must always be to good ends. The whole terminates in reconciliation, happiness, and peace; "the guilty and the injured forgive while folly is derided and its arrogant pretensions humbled; the wronged are restored to their rights, and the lovers made happy in his forgiveness that he almost seem to embody within him three attributes of divinity: Love, power, and wisdom. It is often said that in the delineation of Prospero, Shakespeare largely drew on his own character. It is said that the serene, benign attitude of ripe wisdom which Prospero shows is Shakespeare's. It is assumed that Prospero's farewell to magic is Shakespeare's own farewell to the drama.

Hamlet is the prince of Denmark, the son of a noble father whose warlike qualities are referred to in the play. That he possessed worthy qualities is testified by many references in the play. Hamlet's horror of evil things, his deep filial piety shown equally in his reverence and affection for his father, and his passionate pleadings with his mother, his gentleness and geniality with his friends and social inferiors, his generous spirit in recognising the worth and the rights of others, his consciousness which demands absolute proof of the king's guilt, his contempt of shams and conventions. These qualities speak for themselves and endear him to us. Hamlet's purity of soul and his idealistic approach to life suggest that he was the hope of Denmark. "The expectancy and rose of the fair state, Horatio's tribute at the end of the play summarizes the perfection of Hamlet's character.

"Now cracks a noble heart: good night, sweet prince;

And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest." (Peter Alexander, Act V Scene 2, Hamlet, P. 1069)

Fortinbras also speaks of the royalty of Hamlet's personality:

*"For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royally." (Peter Alexander, Act V Scene 2, Hamlet, p. 1069)*

Thus, the high position and great merits of Hamlet as the tragic hero are presented vividly throughout the play. It is the central point of the hero's character that, despite all the admirable qualities, he is the victim of some peculiar weakness which spoils the whole of his character. In the words of Hamlet, —

*"The drama of an eagle
Doth all the noble substance of a doubt
To his own scandal." (Peter Alexander, Act 2, Scene 2, Hamlet, p. 1048)*

He speaks of men who carry along with their other virtues "the stamp of one defect, being nature's livery or fortune's star." This is the fate of Hamlet. His weakness is that he thinks too much.

Much, and this reflective temperament, overdeveloped in his case, stands in the way of timely action. Besides this, Hamlet is moody, and constantly broods over the evil of his life, and so fails to act the dread command of his father's spirit. Hamlet is subject to violent fits of ungovernable passion which exhaust his physical and mental energies and leave him weak and inactive. When the fit is on him, he does act heroically, fearless of consequences. But given time to think, he is lost in a maze of curious considerations and does nothing. It is this that forms the puzzle of the play. We notice him acting quickly and decisively on the spur of the moment on half a dozen occasions. And yet when the main event confronts him, he vacillates, and this.

Vacillation is due to the over-reflectiveness of his character. It is the fate of the tragic hero that he is placed in circumstances which make all the possibilities and endowments of his character useless and ineffective. This tender young prince, with all his purity and nobility, is plunged into the vortex of evil all around him. He is born to set right hideously abnormal conditions, and succumbs under the duty:

*"The time is out of joint; O cursed spite,
That ever I was born to set it right." (Peter Alexander, Act 1, Scene 5, Hamlet P.1037)*

This strikes the keynote of Hamlet's failure. On the one side he must deal with a villainous uncle of great power and shrewdness, and on the other side with a mother whose dull and lustful nature makes her insensible to her own degradation. Besides this, the woman whom he loved with more than the love of forty thousand brothers proves not only too weak to throw in her lot with her lover but becomes a helpless tool in the hands of his enemies. The court at Elsinore is a sea of corruption, hypocrisy, and immorality. So, Hamlet finds himself isolated. But for the company of Horatio. When Horatio is not with him, Hamlet's isolation is complete. The evil that surrounds him sinks him into a state of morbid melancholy. He thinks of self-slaughter, finds no interest in the entertainments of life, and becomes apathetic to the common ways of life. The world is an unwedded garden, all women are frail, man delights not him, such is Hamlet's melancholy and pessimism. While he was in this state of mind, the great duty of revenge is placed on his shoulders. This is indeed not a happy situation.

Some clever critics may point out what Hamlet should have done under the circumstances. With less reflection and more spirit of action, Hamlet might have saved

himself and the lives of seven others at the end of the play. But this is more speculation. It is interesting to note that if Othello had been in the position of Hamlet, or Hamlet in the position of Othello, the tragedies would never have occurred. But the tragedies do occur, and the wrong man is confronted with a wrong situation, and the result is a tragedy. This is simply the mastery of human life, and it is the purpose of Shakespeare to present that mystery through a spectacle of wonderful impressiveness. It is said that Shakespeare received the emotional stimulus for his creation from the career and personality of the most conspicuous figure in England during the last decade of the 16th century, namely, the brilliant, the moody, the excitable, the unstable, the procrastinating, the ill-fated Earl of Essex. The character of Hamlet is free from the bewilderment that afflicts the modern critics and readers, though with a sense of mystery not a whit less profound.

Shakespeare's greatness lies in his power of creating human and life-like characters. Hotspur and the Prince in Henry IV Part I are set in knightly contrast. At the beginning, the king compares the warlike fame of Percy (Hotspur) with the unwarlike riot of the prince. But the prince proves a better warrior than Percy. A renowned critic, William Hazlitt, asserts, "The characters of Hotspur and Prince Henry are two of the most beautiful and dramatic, both in themselves and from contrast, that ever were drawn." The nickname of Hotspur itself reveals the essential features of Percy's character. Most of his friends and relatives look upon him as rash and impulsive. In his uncle he is a hare-brained Hotspur governed by a spleen. His father calls him an impatient fool. Even Lady Percy complains that he is altogether governed by humors. His conduct bears out fully the substratum of truth underlying these charges. The well-dressed top who interviews him on the battlefield irritates him beyond endurance. King Henry's refusal to ransom Mortimer rouses him to fury.

Hotspur's great passion in life is the quest of honor. It inspires him to heights of fervor. He is ready to pluck honor from the moon or raise it from the bottom of the sea. His quarrel with the king is based essentially on his feeling that the king is behaving dishonorably towards friends and colleagues. He is thus both the king of honor and the theme of Honour's tongue. His prowess and skill in arms are well known, and he naturally takes up the leadership of the rebel army. The prince, however, has more self-control and more steadiness than Hotspur. Even while making merry, he has not forgotten that he is one day destined to be the king of England. Though not winning fame on the battlefield like Hotspur, he has trained himself well in the use of arms. When the crucial test comes in the battle of Shrewsbury, Prince can defeat both Douglas and Hotspur. The more balanced temper of the Prince is also seen in his respectful attitude towards Hotspur. He fully realizes that Hotspur has made a great name for himself and is a noble and gallant foe.

On the other hand, Hotspur has nothing but contempt for the Prince. He is stigmatized as being a madman and satirised as nimble-footed. In fact, Hotspur at one time affects to think that the Prince can never be met on the battlefield and should not be poisoned with a tankard of ale. Though the picture of the Prince, as seen in the play, is less full than that of Hotspur, still one cannot help feeling that Hotspur is the more lovable of the two. There is an element of cold-blooded calculation in the Prince which does not win affection. He can enjoy the company of Falstaff with insincerity; Hotspur exclaims in disgust, "Out upon this half-faced fellowship" (Peter Alexander, Act IV, Scene 1, p. 536). Hotspur is utterly sincere and wholehearted in his likes and dislikes. But one never knows where one is with the prince. The prince is successful in the end, and Hotspur proves a rash and gallant failure. But we have a feeling that Hotspur wins away all the honors of the combat. The full significance of the Prince's victory at

Shrewsbury is very well brought out by Moor man, who states, "Hotspur's death at the hands of the Prince of Wales indicates something more than inferiority of swordsmanship: in his fall we see the valorous but unthinking heroism of a chivalrous age overcome by one in whom deftness of hand is combined with agility of mind."

The similarities between Hotspur and the Prince of Wales have already been commented upon. Both display courage and valour, determination and honor, chivalry and generosity. The contrast between them, however, lies in their way of expressing their qualities. For while Harry Hotspur was violent, impulsive and rash, Prince Harry was always calm, collected and thoughtful. Furthermore, whereas the Prince could recognize Hotspur's good points (and laugh at them — Act II, Scene 4 p. 493) and could throw his challenge out at Hotspur with calm dignity, Harry Hotspur was jealous of the Prince, whom he despised as a mere waster.

The heroine of *Twelfth Night* is Viola, since her assumption of disguise is the motive – spring of the plot. Beautiful and modest, affectionate and constant, shrewd and resourceful, faithful and charitable, Viola is an ideal of the beauty and nobility of love. Transparent honesty is hers. To think of the play is to think at once of Viola. The whole drama hinges on her fortunes. Viola is a very charming person. Olivia speaks thus:

*"Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, action and spirit,
 Coat of arms with fine emblems,
 Do give thee five-fold blazon."* (Elizabeth St. John Donne, Act I, Scene V, P.65)

Viola shows signs of good breeding. She has also accomplishments in music and agreeableness in conversation. Duke Orsino refers to her rubious lips and sweet voice.

In Shakespeare's comedies, the heroines are cleverer and wittier than the heroes. What makes Viola more attractive is her wit and humour. She is sincere and serious with Olivia. She puts on a light behavior with Feste and Maria. She has exchanges of wit with them as well as with Sir Toby and Sir Andrew. Feste finds his match in her. Maria is unable to put her down. Viola shows her remarkable insight when Olivia sends her a ring through Malvolio. She expresses her sympathy for Olivia's fruitless love for herself, though Olivia is her rival in the Duke's heart. She asks the Duke not to blame Olivia for not loving him. An unprotected maid, she wore the garments of a boy, which led her into difficulties. Her womanish timidity is revealed in the dual scenes. She is the page and confidant of the Duke. She must woo a mistress for him, while she herself is in love with him. In this conflict between duty and love, she is true to both. When the Duke threatens to kill her, she is prepared to die. She possesses gratitude and a self-sacrificing nature, loyalty and devotion.

Viola's love for the Duke is pure. Her indirect confession of love to him is highly ingenious and poetical. When she is beset by jealous rivals, she becomes pathetic. She is aware of her situation if she cannot expose her true nature. A robust optimist, she is hopeful that this will untie the knot that is too intricate for her. Viola's happiness is enhanced by the reappearance of her lost brother. Sebastian wins Olivia; Viola marries the Duke, and they live happily ever after. Her success makes us happy. Thus, Viola wins our love and admiration. Her character lends romantic charm to the play. Olivia is like a princess of romance. She appears to be a more complex character than Viola. She forms a pendant to the Duke, and a contrast to Viola. She stands at the central point of the whole action. She is a great lady, dignified and competent. Olivia is a woman of unusual energy. At the beginning of the play, she is mourning the death of her father and brother. For seven years she intends to go veiled. Oppressed by

melancholy, she has abjured the company of men. She is the master of herself; she is virtuous:

She is willful and capricious. The way she turns her back on the Duke's suit infers an icy coldness of character. The appearance of Viola in the guise of Cesario completely transforms Olivia's personality. She becomes suddenly restless and absent-minded. She fixes her eyes upon the page and sends him a ring. She invites him to come again. She passes from intense melancholy and resignation to ardent passion. As the action advances, she slowly gains in our estimation. Her beauty is universally admitted. Even her rival, Viola, generously admits it. The Duke describes her as a miracle and a queen of gems. She lacks a sense of humor. She becomes a victim of the irony of circumstances. And yet she retains her dignity and the grace of her bearing. She hates rudeness. Olivia treats her servants with sympathy and generosity. She inspires a sentiment of loyalty in them. She rebukes Malvolio when he assumes too much. But she is all kindness to him when she thinks him to be affected by madness. She tolerates Sir Toby. She apologizes to Sebastian for Sir Toby's uncivil behavior. She is loved by not less than five persons. But by a sudden freak of fortune, she flies into the arms of Sebastian. He is a very good substitute for the image of the drama, and Olivia welcomes Viola with the gracious words, "sister, you are she". Olivia is merely a female edition of the Duke, sharing his sentimentalism, impulsiveness, caprice, the pang of unrequited love, the craving for a change and ultimate victory in love.

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