



Shakespeare and Literature

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Abstract – Shakespeare’s greatness as a genius was not accepted by his contemporaries but he was a born genius. Later on his worth was acknowledged by everyone. Shakespeare established himself as a great playwright. He initially tried his literary career in writing sonnets and he got success in that field. Shakespeare’s earlier plays are all historical plays. Later on he wrote tragedies and comedies. Main theme in the sonnets of Shakespeare is love. His sonnets exhibit the theme of Hellenism. Shakespeare’s disappointment and his rivalries with his contemporaries is clearly visible in his sonnets. Time and its destructiveness is a major theme in his sonnets. Shakespeare started as a sonneteer but died as a great playwright.

Key words – Shakespeare, Sonnets, playwright, historical plays, tragedies, Comedy, love, poet, Time, death, literary and Contemporary.

Shakespeare and literature

Shakespeare is the greatest playwright and sonneteer but our knowledge about him is quite meagre when over four hundred years ago, an unknown Stratford-born man Shakespeare staged his dramas in the theatre house of London, the people from all walks of life, enjoyed the plays. But as soon as he died, the same people forgot him. The reason was that for the people the drama was the thing but the dramatist was nothing. Even his contemporary failed to assess his greatness. Robert Green, wrote about Shakespeare in his ‘Groatsworth of Wit’ – “An upstart crow beautified with our feathers”. Whereas Ben Jonson recognized the true worth of Shakespeare and wrote – “Soul of the Age, the applause, delight, the wonder of our stage”. But he did not leave any biography of Shakespeare. The situation in the 17th and 18th centuries remained the same. Shakespeare was not read frequently and hardly staged. Elizabethans were interested only in the actions and personalities of great men, such as Kings and Queens, which the playwrights certainly were not. Same is the case of the sonnets of Shakespeare, these sonnets were failed to bring him eminence. These were only privately printed and circulated as pirated copies. These were some more difficulties in understanding the real worth of William Shakespeare. These were ‘disintegrators’ of Shakespeare who told that there was not such person like William Shakespeare who wrote the dramas and the sonnets. This move to disintegrate Shakespeare continued



till the first half of the 20th century. Some critics of Germany and Belgium claimed that the works of Shakespeare actually belonged to Roger Manners, the 5th Earl of Rutland. Some other critics claimed William Stanley, the 6th Earl of Derby, to be the real name behind William Shakespeare. But now the movement of disintegrators has been stopped, perhaps for ever. Their views are considered only fantastical. But today we are quite certain about real William Shakespeare who was born on 23 or 26 April, 1564 at Stratford-upon-Avon, as the third among the seven children of his parents.

Shakespeare began his career with sonnets. Before 1590, Shakespeare wrote a set of 25 sonnets and an Envoy (Sonnet 26) and "Henry VI Part 1". In addition to these 26 Sonnets, Shakespeare probably wrote some other sonnets such as sonnets 107, 123 and 124 and all the 126 'Fair Youth Sonnets'. Immediately after getting success in Sonnet writing, he tried his hand in the profession of a dramatist. He started the new occupation with 'Henry VI, Part I' which was ensued by Henry VI, Part II and Part III, Richard III and 'Titus Andronicus'. All these plays are historical and were completed by 1593. It is clear that Shakespeare began his career as a dramatist with historical plays. The next two to three years he spent in writing comedies, such as "Comedy of Errors", Taming of the Shrew, Two Gentlemen of Verona, Love's Labour's Lost and Romeo and Juliet. There are a number of parallels between these plays and the 'Fair youth Sonnets'.

Shakespeare's literary life can be divided into four periods: the first period from 1585 or 1586 when he reached London to 1594; the 2nd from 1594 to 1600; the third from 1600 to 1608 and the fourth from 1608 to 1612. In the Second period, he produced 15 plays, consisting of comedies such as Love's Labour's Lost, As You Like It etc. in the third period, Shakespeare produced mostly tragedies and a few romances. Some of the plays that Shakespeare wrote in the fourth period are Antony and Cleopatra, Pericles, Coriolanus and Henry VIII and all of these tragedies are weak tragedies in comparison of 3rd period tragedies. In the last period of his literary career Shakespeare once again turned to the theme of love and he wrote three such plays – Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale and The Tempest.

Shakespeare never took any new theme for his sonnets, he frequently used the same eternal theme – love in his sonnets. In this regard Oscar Wilde is perhaps very true when he said that all the 154 sonnets of Shakespeare might be taken to be a whole drama of love. Oscar Wilde interpreted the sonnet sequence of Shakespeare as a tragi-comedy or as a dark comedy. The sonnets of Shakespeare can be considered as a drama. In these sonnets there is action and heroes. There are three characters: a man, a youth and a woman. This trio – exhaust every form of love and go through all its stages. They exhaust all forms of faithlessness, every kind of relationship, including love, friendship, jealousy. They go through the heaven and hell of love. The fourth character of drama is time. Time which devours everything. It devours the fruits of human labour and man himself. The Fair Youth and The Dark lady are the two persons to whom Shakespeare addresses his sonnets, the first and the main theme of the 154 sonnets is love. In the sonnets he presents love in its broader perspectives and with its several facets. In loving the youth, he has fairly extended the traditionally described boundary of love. Shakespeare's love for the



young man is platonic, and never homosexual. Shakespeare has shown both the facets of love: the physical love and the non-physical love.

The second theme in Shakespeare's sonnets is Hellenism: beauty. We know that Shakespeare had "less Greek". Shakespeare's Hellenism is clear from his sonnets. Truth and beauty are complementary and interdependent: Where there is beauty there is truth, and where there is truth, perhaps, there is beauty. It is supposed that Keats derived his idea of identity of truth and beauty from Sonnet 101. Shakespeare considers in his sonnets that love is more powerful than both truth and beauty, because both of them depends on love: "Both truth and beauty on my love depends" (Sonnet 101). But very soon the poet in his sonnet 137 contradicts the above statement when he says that love is "blind fool" and so love does not always leads us to truth.

It is clear that Shakespeare was not too much ambitious. Otherwise he could not be gentle, companionable, affable and modest in behaviour as it was claimed by his contemporaries. Actually what he wanted was a modest fortune, but even that much was denied for him or he was not able to fetch it. And this situation led him to utter despair which is visible in his sonnets. The rival poets is yet another theme of sonnets 78-80, 82-86. In sonnet 79, the poet persuades the fair youth not to thank the rival poet for what praise he tendered to him. Shakespeare says that the rival poets can only grossly paint the beauty of Fair Youth and so they are only abusing the beauty of Fair Youth. Shakespeare's feelings of inferiority complex in his sonnets is not unnatural, because we should remember that his sonnets were his earlier works.

Time and its destructiveness have been a great theme, in his a number of sonnets. Death, Time, its destructiveness run through almost all the works of Shakespeare. Shakespeare is merely concerned with the effects of Time on animate and inanimate beings, on persons and personal relationships. Shakespeare was not the only poet who thinks deeply over Time. If we go back to the Elizabethan age, then we will find that Time occupied a great portion of people's consciousness. And this situation continued to remain till the end of the Renaissance.

No doubt Shakespeare's greatness was not acknowledged even by his contemporaries but he was a born genius, so later-on his geniusness was accepted by one and all. Shakespeare is now a great established Playwright. But in his early literary career he tried his luck in sonnet writing, and he got success in this field also. He started writing historical drama but later on got success in tragedies and comedies. As far as Shakespeare's sonnets are concerned, love theme dominants. The theme of Hellenism is also visible in his sonnets. His sonnets show his despair and his rivalaries with other poets. Time and its destructive effects is a major theme in his sonnets. Shakespeare started his literary career as a sonneteer but it ended with a great playwright.



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