

Elizabethan Drama

Historical Background

Drama in England started with the Medieval Church. Priests, wishing to make the Bible vivid to unlearned people, themselves performed very simple dramatic versions of stories from the Bible in their churches. These Miracle Plays, as they were called, became very elaborate and so popular that they had to be moved out of the church itself and were performed in the church porch and finally in the grounds surrounding the church. Eventually the plays lost their religious meaning and they were abandoned by the Church. They were taken over by the flourishing trade guilds, which came to regard good productions as a matter of civic pride. They changed their name to Mystery Plays and were performed on wagons in the streets of the towns.

The Morality Play was another medieval dramatic form which had been popular. In these plays the characters were usually personified abstractions of vices and virtues competing for the possession of man's soul. The most famous were called "Everyman". They reflected the interest in symbolism and allegory of that time.

The Morality Play formed a direct link between Medieval and Elizabethan Drama. Both in technical and literary aspects. They were designed for more educated audiences, Morality Plays were performed at schools and colleges and in the courtyards of inns,

where the audience stood in front of the cart or all around in galleries which were part of the design of the inn-yard.

The characters of the medieval Morality play were simplified and possessed only one trait, (e.g. honesty, greed, lust, etc.), but gradually they progressed into the complex characters of Elizabethan drama. This transition away from personified abstraction to real life characters was a result of the Renaissance philosophy that men were fascinating objects of study. Allegory weakened and dialogue was strengthened and elaborated until there grew up a more general kind of drama which developed either into tragedy or comedy.

It was only in 1576 that the first professional playhouse was built in London. It was called "The Theatre". This theatre as well as others of that time were either round or hexagonal with a very deep stage projecting far out into the pit where the ordinary people stood throughout the performance. The wealthier people sat in galleries almost surrounding the stage and could even buy seats actually on the stage. Little or no scenery was used and no front curtain; there were few artificial aids for the actors to create illusion. This was the kind of theatre for which Shakespeare wrote.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)



Considered by most literary critics as England's greatest poet and playwright, Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in the Midlands where he received only a secondary education then moved to London where he found work in a theatre. After doing various odd jobs and some acting, he began adapting and altering existing plays and eventually moved onto producing original work. In all he wrote thirty-seven plays ranging in subject matter from the death of Julius Caesar to light-hearted comedies set in imaginary circumstances. The plays fall into three groups; Historical, Tragedies and Comedies.

Based on historical truth, the Historical plays, concerned mainly the study of previous English kings. Roman histories were included and reflect the Renaissance Elizabethan's interest in antiquity. Shakespeare was much interested in the subject of kingship and the use and abuse of power, which is one of his favorite themes.

The Renaissance tradition of violent melodrama was seen in the Tragedies, expressed in rhetorical speeches and concerning events that are controlled by a mixture of circumstance and fate, and by man's own doings as well as the determining aspects of his personality. They are full of human folly, hatred, cruelty, lust and horror, as well as love and compassion. The whole gamut of human experience is included in these plays.

The Comedies are lively and full of dramatic irony, strange coincidences and oddly assorted characters. Sometimes they are farcical or romantic, and as their name indicates always end happily; whereas tragedies, by definition, end unhappily.

Despite presenting some difficulty for people to immediately understand the full meaning of his writing, the reason Shakespeare is as popular today as he was in his own time, is that theatres throughout the English speaking world are assured success when presenting Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare's stagecraft, the poetry and powerful imagery of the writing and his profound understanding of human nature are the unique characteristics of his work have enabled them to endure the passing of four hundred years

It was Shakespeare's own working knowledge of the theatre that contributed to his stagecraft. The main plots of his plays are often supported with subplots and the two (or more) are frequently carefully interwoven to support and extend each other. The subtle juxtaposing of dramatic, romantic and sometimes comic situations works upon the emotions of the audience, thereby heightening their involvement in the action and constantly drawing them into the world of illusion that Shakespeare creates. He uses such techniques as introducing a short comic scene before a highly dramatic one so as to relax his audience in order that the effect of the coming drama will be more strongly felt by the audience.

Techniques as the 'soliloquy' where the actor talks to himself so as to reveal his innermost thoughts, and also 'asides' (particularly in comedies) where an actor makes a quick remark to the audience were widely used by Shakespeare.

The plays were mostly written in blank (unrhyming) verse. The ideal vehicle for lifting the emotions of the audience. Prose is also used to provide contrasts in mood, tempo, situation and sometimes to show the social differences between high and low-born characters. Rhyming couplets are also included on occasion, usually spoken by metaphysical characters and to signify the ending of scenes.

The use of language, the poetry and imagery contained in the lines produced by Shakespeare are reason that his plays should be carefully read as well as heard on the stage. His writing is filled with beauti-

ful simile and metaphor, imagery and allusions, as well as an infinite understanding of the meaning and feeling of words. This skill enables his characters to perfectly express the complexities of their personalities, their emotional states and interpersonal relations.

The imagery which stems from a multitude of sources, is frequently used to strengthen the basic themes and tones of his plays. These are sometimes further supported by symbolism both in speech and action. In the play 'Hamlet', one of the themes of which is the corruption of the monarchy and court, there are constant references to images of disease, infection and physical corruption.

Shakespeare had an insight into the workings of the human personality which enabled him to provide the characters he created with qualities of enduring interest. It is this as much as anything that makes his plays popular with modern audiences.

He had an insight of men from kings and courtiers to drunkards and country bumpkins. He understands the intricacies of the mind, the conflicting emotions of men and the forces that motivate them. Each character is a complex living individual, never stereotyped, and frequently finely contrasted in the plays. The outcome of the action is often determined by this contrasting of personalities and their strengths and weaknesses. This is particularly so in the tragedies; Macbeth is ruined by his lust for power, Hamlet's death is a result of his own inability to make decisions.

'HAMLET'

Hamlet, the prince of Denmark whose father, the king, has been murdered by Hamlet's uncle who takes over the throne. Hamlet finds out about it and vows to revenge his father's death. However, he is unable to make the decision to actually kill his uncle and keeps delaying it until numerous tragedies occur. Only when Hamlet himself is dying is he able to finally do what he first intended.

The next two extracts are to show Hamlet's troubled frame of mind. In the first (which is a soliloquy) he contemplates suicide as a means of resolving his dilemma.

The second shows Hamlet talking to his one trusted friend, Horatio, and contrasts his own personality with that of his friend.

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,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more, and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuttled off this mortal coil,¹
Must give us pause. there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;²

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
And could of men distinguish, her election³
Hath sealed⁴ thee for herself; for thou has been
As one, in suffering all, that suffers nothing,
A man that fortune's buffets and rewards
Hath ta'en with equal thanks; and bless'd are those
Whose blood and judgement are so well Commingled⁵
That they are not a pipe for fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please. Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart,
As I do thee ...

The selection below is from a soliloquy where Hamlet makes one of his frequent resolutions to act, shows the imagery of corruption that is used throughout the play.

'Tis now the very witching time of night,
When churchyards yawn and Hell itself breathes out
Contagion⁶ to this world; now could I drink hot blood,
And do such bitter business as the day
Would quake to look on ...
And again when Hamlet wishes he were dead;
O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed
His canon⁷ against self-slaughter! Oh God! God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on it, sh, fie!⁸ 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank⁹ and gross¹⁰ O in nature
Possess it merely. .

DISCUSSION:

1. What is the meaning of the first two selections from 'Hamlet'?
2. Hamlet blames an influencing force in both selections. What is it?
3. Examine the descriptive writing in these selections.
4. How does this writing reflect the society and times in which it was written?

¹ sloughed off this turmoil that is life

² that makes us live out a long life of calamity

³ choice

⁴ chosen

⁵ blended

⁶ disease

⁷ law

⁸ curse it!

⁹ wild

¹⁰ disgusting