

## (C) SHAKESPEARE'S GENIUS

**Conception of human character.**—In nothing is Shakespeare so great as in his conception of human character. This is most profound contribution to literature. He is a mighty creator of humanity and a profound psychologist of the passions and humours of human, and a profound psychologist of the passions and humours of human, even of superhuman and sub-human beings. His creative genius has given us a whole universe over which his imagination presides like a god.

But the central assumption behind all this variety of character is that man is the master of his destiny, that in other words, character is destiny. No doubt chance and change and circumstances go a great way in moulding character, but man is free to choose what life offers, and in so choosing it decides its own fate. This is Shakespeare's conception of human character, and it is distinct from that of dramatists like Marlowe who regard men as puppets in the hands of Fate and who make Fate a power outside human control. Shakespeare, on the other hand shows that we are thus and thus because we think and do this and that.

In other words, Shakespeare, while agreeing with those who would make character dependent on outside powers, yet allows greater scope, and freedom for man's individual will and unbending spirit. He thus presents the essential dignity and greatness of human character which, while it breaks under the stress of chance and change, never bends or bows to those forces.

**Variety of human characters.**—No other dramatist has left as many characters as Shakespeare. He presents us with the vast spectacle of humanity, rich with variety and contrasts. We see every rank of humanity in his plays, from kings, prophets and priests to the lowest figures of clowns, beggars and rustics. We see scholars, poets, men of action, of dreams, as well as criminals, murderers, cheats, rogues and vagabonds. Not only this, we are introduced to a new species of superhuman and sub-human qualities in his fairies, ghosts, witches and savage. Ariel rubs shoulder with Caliban, aristocrats with democrats, kings with clowns old age with youth; and the richness of this variety is staggering indeed. Here is God's plenty in the dramas.

**Truth and individuality of characters.**—What strikes us most in reading his dramas is the truth of Nature and the individuality of the characters. Except in his earlier comedies whose main purpose is to present laughable situations, Shakespeare gives us literally hundreds of characters which are unmistakably individualised.

Indeed so true to life are these characters that volumes have been written upon their humours and passions, as if they were sober mortals of our actual world, and not airy nothings of fiction to which he has given a local habitation and a name. We know these figures better than most of our neighbours, so typically vital and distinct are these. They live and talk more truly than most true men and women.

Truely did Pope write when he said:

"The characters of Shakespeare are so much Nature herself, that it is a sort of injury to call them by so distant a name as copies of her. Those of other poets have a constant resemblance, which shows that they recieved them from one another and were but multipliers of the same image. But every single character in Shakespeare is as much an Individual as those in Life itself; it is impossible to find any two alike."

**His sympathy.**—Shakespeare possesses a universal sympathy by which he is able to see something good even in evil things. He is in this respect true to Nature and evil. This truth is felt and expressed by Shakespeare in his dramas where the worst characters are treated with a wonderful understanding and insight which sympathy alone is capable of sustaining. There is no side of life with which he was wholly unacquainted, and every side of life which he loved and sympathised with. It is this large-hearted bounty of his genius which makes his dramas wholly natural and real.

**His imagination.**—In the much of Theseus in a Midsummer Night's Dream Shakespeare has put a description of creative imagination which he himself possesses. His imagination glances from heaven to earth, and from earth to heaven. It gives to airy nothing a local habitation and a name, after bodying forth the forms of things unknown. In other words Shakespeare's imagination is poetic, creative and imitative in the real sense. It is by virtue of his power of the time imagination that he was enabled to pierce the heart of the mystery of life, and embody it in his dramas. It is his imagination which has presented life in its manifold aspects, the grave and the gay, the good and the evil, the tragic and the comic.

**His humour.**—If Shakespeare presented the spectacle of human sufferings in his tragedies, he presented no less the motley spectacle of human folly and vanity in his comedies. His laughter, as Meredith poetically points out, was broad as ten thousand beeves grazing on a sunny hillside. But the secret of this humour was his deep knowledge of Nature and sympathy with his kind. He has no bitterness in his laughter. We love those whom he makes us laugh at. His humour

is full of humanity. He has none of the self-righteous outlook of the high-brows of the Puritans who would expect humans to be angels. He recognises that to err is human, and that we are touched and tarred with the same brush of self-love that makes us fools. But it is only the wise ones who know that they are fools, and that is how Shakespeare's fools are some of the wisest of mortals. How rich and enjoyable this gift of humour is in him we can only know by studying the gallery of his immortal fools from Feste to Falstaff, and Bottom to Touchstone. The human comedy has never been so richly presented as in the pages of Shakespeare's comedies.

**His moral outlook.**—Coleridge, writing on this point, says:

"Let the morality of Shakespeare be contrasted with that of the writers of his own, or the succeeding age, or those of the present day, who boast their superiority in this respect. He neither excites nor flatters passion in order to degrade the subject of it. He keeps at all times on the high road of life. He has no innocent adulteries, no interesting incests, no virtuous vice; he never renders that amiable which religion and reason alike teach us to detest, or clothes impurity in the garb of virtue, like Beaumont and Fletcher, the Kotzebues of the day. Shakespeare's fathers are roused by ingratitude, his husbands stung by unfaithfulness; in him, in short, the affections are wounded in those points in which all may, nay, must feel."

This is an admirable analysis of Shakespeare's moral outlook. Of course, he is not a preacher of morality of the conventional type. But he condemns immorality, while pitying those who embody its manifestations.

**Defects and blemishes in plays.**—Shakespeare was the most practical dramatist who had a particular audience in view to please and most of the defects pointed out by critics arise as a result of this purpose. The tastes of the public were very wild, barbarous and childish; and there is a corresponding amount of verbal jugglery, inordinate punning and far-fetched conceits. His own contemporary, Ben Jonson noted some of these defects, while praising the plays. He said:

"I remember, the players have often mentioned it as an honour to Shakespeare, that in his writing, he never blotted out a line. My answer had been, would that he had blotted a thousand."

Hasty writing and public taste were responsible for many of the crudities of the plays. Trivial jokes, narratives hindering action, flights of rhetoric ill-fitted in dramatic plot—are some of the blemishes in his dramas. But let us beware of blaming a lily because it is not rose! As Ben Jonson himself rightly remarked:

"He redeemed his vices by his virtues; there is ever more in him to be praised than pardoned."

(D) SHAKESPEARE AS A DRAMATIC ARTIST

**The Mechanism of his Tragedies and Comedies.** The dramatic art of Shakespeare can only be appreciated when we remember the stage of drama before he entered the theatre. English drama upto his day was divided into Miracle Plays and Mystery Plays and Interludes and Histories. They were all very crude in craftsmanship and religious in motive. They were meant to elevate rather than entertain. Shakespeare retains some of the elements of these forms in his plays. However, his predecessors like Marlowe, Lily, Greene, Kyde and Peele, had evolved a form of drama whose distinction was that it was mainly secular as contrasted from the religious motive of the earlier drama. Shakespeare took many hints from the artistic means of his predecessors, such as the blank verse of Marlowe, the prose dialogue of Lily and the songs which are introduced into the plays.

In the realm of tragedy, the pre-Shakespeare drama was one in which blood and thunder dominated, and crude display of horror was its main note. Fallen greatness was its theme, and the success of the tragedy depended entirely upon the amount of bloodshed on the stage. Ghosts were generously used to create horror and terror, and comedy was kept scrupulously out of the scenes.

Shakespeare changed all this in his tragedies. He retained elements of surprise, mystery and terror but used them to finer issues. There are ghosts and witches and deaths in his tragedies; but the emphasis of tragic conflict is put on the inner conflict within the soul of the tragic heroes. Meredith's lines apply to the type of Shakespearean tragedy.

"In tragic plot, God wot, no villain need be;  
Passions spin the plot."

Shakespeare's tragedies show the conflict between the passions of the same hero. There is the villain no doubt; but the emphasis is on the inner conflict, the divided soul of the hero, contending against.

In the mechanism of a Shakespearean tragedy we find the elements of the supernatural, but this is used differently. The supernatural is the outward manifestation of the natural passions and ambitions and the afflicted conscience of the sufferers. The ghosts and witches of Shakespeare are not independent existences, as in ordinary dramas, but embodiments of the evil conscience of

the tragic character.

So, too in the conception of the tragic heroes of Shakespeare. They are not, as in popular tragedies, victims of superhuman or non-human Fate, but the victims of their own errors. As one of the characters puts it:

"Our deeds are ours, though their ends none of our own." Man is free to act, and must reap the crop of his own deeds. Such is the tragic art of Shakespeare. In comedies, he employs the same elements of surprise and mystery as in the tragedies, but the ending in these is happy. The mystery is dissolved, explained and harmonised. The common basis for both is the assumption of the abnormal. Man behaves abnormally both in tragedies and comedies, but the result in the former is unhappy, while that in the latter is happy.

It is only when we compare the crude mechanism of the pre-Shakespearian comedy with the subtle art of Shakespearian comedy that we come to know what great art is here in Shakespeare's comedies. He uses a number of stories in the comedies and the plot takes the form of complication and resolution. Shakespearian comedy is romantic as well as realistic. Great art is shown in combining the two. He does this by use of two plots—the principal and the subsidiary. The former deals with romantic figures and high life, while the latter deals with realistic figure and low life. It is this which gives universality to his comedies. Their main theme is of course love, and the many tangles into which it leads men and women. In his comedies he is interested in contriving laughable situations, but he puts high sentiments and deep inflections into his characters, and this renders his comedies life-like and real.

**His mastery of stage-craft.** Anyone who contrasts a modern stage with that of Shakespeare's days will realise what difficulties he had to solve in the staging of his plays. The absence of scenery was most unpromising aspect of the Elizabethan stage. But Shakespeare's genius makes a virtue of this necessity, and introduces poetry to supplement the lack of scenery. The mind is exercised, not the eye or the senses, and genius overcame the drawbacks of the stage in this masterful way. His art here is essentially empirical, experimental, and takes the realities of the stage into account, and endeavoured to make the best of what was available. It is wonderful to realise what richness of poetic touches is embodied in his plays precisely because the poverty of the stage. The scenery which the naked stage could not supply is provided in the text of the plays. Thus it is the rich exercise of our imagination rather than the indulgence of our senses, which is evident in the witnessing of Shakes-

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peare's plays. Shakespeare soon mastered this technique, and the extent of his mastery of stagecraft could only be realised and appreciated when we remember the innumerable happy touches of poetic description interspersed throughout his dramas.

So with the other stage conventions of his day. He enriched and vitalised everyone of them. The clown, for example, was a hindrance rather than a help to the action of the drama in the popular plays. But look at Shakespeare's handling of these fools! How important and enjoyable they become in his hands!

**His characterisation.** The earlier playwrights sent wooden, lifeless abstractions on the stage, but Shakespeare, as a modern poet happily puts it, sends "human wholeness" walking on the boards. When we see them we are sure they are real human beings, full of humour, passion and humanity, acting and reacting much as we would, were we to be placed in their predicaments. It is the vitality of his men and women, which grips our attention and keeps us spell-bound throughout the course of the performance. There is a rich variety in these characters ranging from kings to clowns, walking on the stage lost in their private humours and visions. That is why they impress our imagination with indelible imprints of their personality and figure.

**Test of his dramatic genius.** The test of Shakespeare's dramatic genius is that after three hundred years of changeful fashions and tastes, he remains as fresh today as when his plays were first put on the Elizabethan boards. He is of all ages and of all times, and this universal quality of his dramas is unique in the history of world's literature. Every school of criticism, every clique of dramatic writing takes inspiration from him. The romantic, the classical, the modern, the realistic, the ultramodernist all types and symbols of literary art find their inspiration in his dramas. Shakespeare appeals to everyone, irrespective of age, sex, nationality and race. And the wonder is that like Nature, his genius is an enigma and a mystery. An ordinary youngman without formal education goes to London, and after a few days writes some of the masterpieces of dramatic art! That is mystery about Shakespeare, and we might not try to explain it all. We may see and read and enjoy his plays, but to trace their source of appeal to any fixed principle of art is a vain attempt, for with masterful art he conceals himself in his creations. We may form some general patterns of thought and feeling in his dramas, but he is so superbly dramatic that we cannot know his own thoughts and feelings from any given scene or character. This indeed is the greatest of his dramatic genius.

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**His plays or Self-Revelation.** It is quite obvious from what has been said above that it is vain to trace the personal thoughts and feelings of Shakespeare from study of his plays. But the question is so very fascinating that great minds have been exercised by its speculation and guessed at the secrets of his heart and mind. Wordsworth believed that Shakespeare revealed his own self in the sonnets, but even this is denied by Browning. If Shakespeare could not be revealed in his sonnets, which are lyrical and personal, how much less could he be said to reveal himself in his dramas which are emphatically objective and impersonal in form.

Moulton has warned us against what he calls the fallacy of quotation which is practised by those who ascribe the thoughts of the characters to their creator. And it is mostly from such ascriptions that the so-called revelations of Shakespeare are shown by some hopeful critics. When, for instance, Hamlet says, "Frailty, thy name is woman!" it is hastily pronounced that Shakespeare is a woman-hater, forgetting that, let alone the galaxy of immortal women in the other plays, in Hamlet itself he has created Ophelia as against Gertrude.

In other words, there is no self-revelation in the dramas of Shakespeare in the popular sense. It would be undramatic if it were so. Shakespeare is unlike Shaw, for instance, whose plays tell us what he likes and dislikes. Shakespeare's plays are not dramatised discussion of this or that thesis. There is no autobiographical element in them. As one of his recent critics puts it:

"Archival studies planned to elucidate his life, have chiefly brought to light the personalities of others. We are aware that his plays are the results of deer experience, but their biographical causes are beyond our knowledge. With the knowledge of horses or of medicine, Shakespeare knows that which is useful for his strictly artistic purpose and we must not press him further. He conceals his own person we should like to know what was his creed in that age of religious strife, but he offers us with regard to ghosts the Catholic Orthodoxy of Old Hamlet, the scepticism of Horatio and the Lutherean mistrust of Hamlet himself, leaving no certainly of the Shakespearian view. It was not likely to have been negative, but he had no wish to expose it for public inspection. As a playwright his function was not to reveal himself, but to seize upon everything that would give life and interest to his puppets."

The italics in the above are ours, and it is to be noted that there is no effort or purpose on the part of Shakespeare to reveal *himself* in his plays. In this he stands alone apart from Marlowe or Jonson.

in his own age, and Shaw in our own. We cannot put our fingers on particular passages in his plays and point out that this or that is what Shakespeare thought or left or did.

But all the same, there is no denying that we can form a general impression of the climate of his soul and the history of his mind by a study of all his works. We are not far from the truth when we say that he reveals the bias of his thought in some of his fools and lesser characters. Touchstone in *As You Like It* is a clue to Shakespeare's mind when he says:

"And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe.  
And then from hour to hour we rot and rot.  
And thereby hangs a tale!

And in the pronouncement of Prospero we may find what Shakespeare was with regard to his outlook on life:

"We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep."

This is as far as we can go in tracing the outlook of Shakespeare. We can surely make a broad sketch of the development of his mind from a study of his plays. We can certainly point out that there is brilliance and vital joy in the earlier period, a serenity in the second period, and abrupt change to bitterness in the third and an apparent reconciliation at last. This much we can say but no further. We do not know why he became so bitter in the tragic period, for example, and it will be mere guess work to do so. The plays themselves are superbly dramatic and their art so profound that there is no hint as to the causes that led him to write what he did.

**Shakespeare's Audience.** The Elizabethan play-going public was a rich montely of varied tastes and temperaments. It was an age of adventure and action and England was young in spirit with the boundless hope of youth before it. The audience liked spectacles of rapid action, heroism and adventure. If the sailors of Queen Elizabeth mapped the seas of the world, the dramatists mapped the mind of man. They showed the heights and depths of passion and this was what the audience needed.

The majority of the audience, the groundlings as they were called, had very rough and rude tastes. They liked nothing better than crude scenes or of horror and mystery and so ghosts pleased them more than anything else. Also they liked shedding blood in that age of cock-fighting, bull-baiting and fox-hunting. Duels and fights were a very common feature of the age. So in the plays we

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find any number of deaths, murders, hangings, executions and so on. Kyd and Marlowe gave enough of blood and thunders for their audience, and Shakespeare too does not deny them of their fair share of blood and horror. But he uses them for finer issues.

In fun, too the audience was childish in its love of horseplay. They liked scenes of rollicking mirth, practical jokes, verbal wit and side-splitting laughter. So it is that we find in the comedies very rich fun indeed. Bottom with the ass's head is a typical example of the taste of the audience in Shakespeare's day's.

Along with this love for rhetoric and bombast and blood-shed and rollicking fun, the audience also liked songs, dances and pageants. That is why the plays are full of songs and spectacular scenes. In this high as well as low were one. They all loved rich pageantry and sweet songs.

**Shakespeare and modern dramatists.** When we compare Shakespeare with modern dramatists we find that Shakespeare's plays are written in verses while those of the moderns are written in prose. This a fundamental change in the outlook of the Elizabethans and the moderns. The Elizabethans were believers in the divine right of kings and aristocracy and nobility were the accepted rulers of mankind. Today, however, the spirit of democracy has replaced that of aristocracy and the modern age is that of the common man. Hence, it is that modern playwrights use prose, for they are addressing the demos, the many-headed monster of mobocracy which is no respecter of your fine speeches and poetic rhetoric. Shakespeare's characters speak verse because they are royal persons and their outlook is high and noble. The average modern hero in a modern play is a clerk or a sailor or a worker in the mines and factories. Poetry is of course out of the picture in such a prosaic situation.

Secondly, Shakespeare uses the supernatural though, of course, he gives it his own individual colour and bias. But the ghosts and fairies and witches rarely come on the modern stage. Science has killed all of them, though the modern dramatists do try now and then to introduce them into their plays. But there is a polar difference between the childlike beliefs and credulity of the Elizabethans and the average scepticism of the modern man which accounts for the change in the dramatists also who cater to contemporary tastes.

These are the main differences between Shakespearian dramas and those of moderns.

**History of Shakespearian criticism.**—This is fundamentally an endless subject and we will merely note here the broad outline of Shakespearian criticism, rather than its details. Shakespeare's critics date right from his own age down to our own day. And the tribe is yet increasing. The great names in the list are those of Ben Jonson, Dryden, Morygaun, Pope, Johnson, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Lamb, De Quincey, Carlyle, Bradley, G. B. Harrison, Nicoll, Moulton and Dover wilson.

Taken century-wise the criticism, Shakespeare may be described as follows :

In his won age, that is, up to 1600 or so, his critics were appreciative as well as critical. That is to say, they admired the beauties without forgetting the faults of the great dramatist. This type of judicial criticism, with its impartiality and common sense attitude was taken up and continued in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Dryden in the 17th,, and Pope and Johnson in the 18th are the greatest critics of Shakespeare. Differing the details, all these hold equally the same broad general views of Shakespeare's dramas. Their main point of ciritcism is that Shakespeare was an irregular genius who somehow or other still excelles every 'regular' artist. They held that Shakespeare has broken every known classical precept about drama, and that yet he produced the greatest of plays. In other words the irregularities of Shakespeare were felt to be right but were argued to be wrongful.

In the Nineteenth century, a reaction was brought against everything found in the eighteenth century, and so, where the 18th century critics had ragarded Shakepeare as a man with all the errors due to man, the 19th century critics began to regard Shakespeare as a divinity with no faults. Thus it was with the dramatic critics of the Romantic period—Coleridge Hazlit, Lamb, etc. They regarded him with superstitious veneration. They dwelt at large upon the beauties of Shakespeare, and particularly upon his characters whom they treated as historical rather than dramatic men and women. Bradley's masterpiece of shakespearian criticism is the last consummate instance of this type of analytical ciritcism.

On the whole there was really no differnce between the critics of the 18th and the 19th centuries. The latter merely illustrated

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what the former had pointed out as the excellences of Shakespeare. Pope had said for instance, that Nature and Shakespeare were the same, the 19th century critics in effect, wrote a detailed exposition of this judgment in the matter of Shakespeare's characters whom they took to be real men and women, and not merely dramatic figures.

**Shakespeare and his modern critics.**—Just as the 19th century reacted against the 18th, so the 20th, has done against its predecessor. Prof. Raleigh is the mouthpiece of all modern critics when he says:

Our sin is not indifference; but superstition. His (Shakespeare's) poetry has been used like wedding cake, not to eat but to dream upon.....Let us make an end of this and do justice to Shakespeare, the craftsman.

This is the essential feature of modern criticism of Shakespeare. Shakespeare is no longer regarded as either an irregular genius (as the 17th and 18th century did) or as a god with no laws (as the 19th century did) but as an artist and a craftsman, working in a given environment within a given form and adopting these for his particular ends. That is to say, the modern method of approach to Shakespeare is to study the age in which he lived, the books he read, the theatres which he wrote for etc. Shakespeare the artist, rather than Shakespeare the Prophet and Philosopher is the modern concern, and the most typical of this school of criticism is the work of writers like Granville Barker, Sir E. Chammmbers, W. W. Greg and Dover wilson.

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