

# The life and work of william shakespeare: his contribution to the contemporary th...

[Literature](#), [British Literature](#)



Though his active dates now approach nearly five hundred years in the past, William Shakespeare remains one of the most prominent playwrights in the world. Countless festivals, theater training institutes, and theatrical seasons continue to produce William Shakespeare's major works for the theater year after year.

In addition, the plays and sonnets of William Shakespeare continue to set the standard for the study of the English language in its dramatic context in institutes of higher learning and performance training. The ability of one playwright to sustain such popularity over centuries is equaled only by that of the Greek playwrights such as Sophocles and Aeschylus.

Truly, the impact of this one dramatist on the modern theater is staggering in its reach and tenacity. The following essay seeks to investigate the contribution of William Shakespeare's work to contemporary theater, using the tragedy of Othello and Macbeth as its main sources. In addition, this paper will point to the impact of William Shakespeare's Sonnet 18 on the study of literature.

The theater that existed during the time when William Shakespeare lived and created his plays was qualitatively different than the modern theater. One of the main distinctions was the fact that men played all the roles, including those of the women.

In William Shakespeare's time, it was deemed vulgar for women to perform. In fact, for many years the term actress was little more than a euphemism for prostitute (Pollard 13). Many members of polite society viewed the

theater as tawdry entertainment for the masses, rife with vice and women of loose moral character, and a hotbed of lewd and lascivious behavior.

Indeed, during Shakespeare's time, critics warned that the plays "take advantage of their verbal power and aesthetic pleasure in order to seduce viewers in vice" (Pollard 20). Women in particular were cautioned about the "sexual depravity of plays and the threats theatergoing poses to chastity, painting a lurid picture of a world of inescapable erotic temptations" (Pollard 20).

Despite these puritanical limitations, William Shakespeare created some of the most compelling female characters of the theater - full-blooded, three dimensional female characters such as Portia and Desdemona. Therefore, the impact of his works on the contemporary theater exists largely in the contribution his female characters made to cultural liberation of women beyond their roles.

The most obvious example is Lady Macbeth. In contemporary theater, Lady Macbeth remains one of the most fascinating and complex female characters of the theatrical canon - an unabashedly power hungry, ambitious female that set the context for women to be viewed as having individual desire and individual will related to power that not only transcended their commitment to their husbands but also their fear of social reprisal.

Lady Macbeth's manipulation of her husband is one of the earliest examples of this, and her machinations and viciousness are surpassed only by those of Clytemnestra.

Shakespeare and his plays contribute to the modern theater by means of the influential formation of story, a great deal of plot twists, and gripping and complicated story arcs in which intertwined characters created love triangles, murder plots, and revenge schemes.

In addition, the modern theater still looks to William Shakespeare's plays as the role model of poetic wording, the eloquent expression of the inner thoughts and motivations of characters, and unique, forceful language.

The tragedy of Othello belongs to the latter period of William Shakespeare's plays, during which the plays ceased to be imitative and took on a uniqueness and richness equaled only by their darkness. If the earlier pieces of William Shakespeare's writing were more humorous, the latter plays became more significantly more pessimistic (Kiefer 109).

The latter period of William Shakespeare's works is populated by deeply personal, depressive perceptions of power, family, and love. Thus, the mood on the stage changed as well. The problems of death, jealousy, infidelity, and betrayal rampant in these latter tragedies, particularly Othello, revealed a dark side of the playwright.

William Shakespeare was one of the first playwrights to genuinely move his audience to tears. Remembering his tragedies, such as Romeo and Juliet or Othello, it is possible to state that Shakespeare made the characters alive, added dramatic plotting, realistic human situations, and encouraged the audience to not simply watch the story but to feel it.

Barber and Greenblatt say that William Shakespeare managed to present and transform plot materials as well as he could borrow “plot involved negative behavior on the basis of romantic absolutes which was not changed” (8).

Othello stands apart from the other tragedies on account of its social issue theme - one of the earliest treatments of racism in the theater. This is the drama which makes people excited with the feelings and deep love, then, the audience is worried because of betrayal and distrust and finally, people are shocked and despaired with the final scene of the play.

The plot and the genre are important as watching the play people should understand what they are to wait for, but the performer should still impress them with the stream of emotions they are unable to hide. Similarly, in Othello, a new treatment of both character and character relationships on stage exists.

As Bradbook explains, Othello’s “function of reason itself is destroyed when he loses faith in Desdemona” (178). Iago’s plot reveals the essential insecurity and fragility of the Moor, and as Bradbook notes, the murder of Desdemona heralds a “new concept of identity” (178).

In essence, when Othello murders his wife, he murders himself. Since he and Desdemona close to marry against the social norms of the time, they “become utterly dependent on each other. They live in an enclosed universe of two, and the price of their free choice is vulnerability” (Bradbook 178).

As Desdemona admits, " That I did love the Moor to live with him, / My downright violence and storm of fortunes / May trumpet to the world" (Shakespeare 26). Thus, the devastation wreaked by Iago pales in comparison to the destruction of the core sense of self witnessed in the character of Othello.

The play contributes a deep and painful study of the weakness of the lone, defiant personality amid overwhelming social censure, a theme that has been echoed many times since in contemporary theater from Samuel Beckett to Sarah Kane.

The language, expressions and words used in William Shakespeare's plays impacted the theater development in the past and contributed to the contemporary development of the sphere. Many scholars agree that the choice of the words and word combinations in William Shakespeare's sonnets also provide the culture of communication that continues to influence generations.

Considering the sonnets William Shakespeare wrote, specifically Sonnet 18, this work " affirms the value of poetry itself and [William Shakespeare's] own ability to write poetry which will last and which will convey the beauty of his lover to future generations" (Woolway 2).

Sonnet 18 reveals the powerful and impressive tone and language choice. " Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? / Thou art more lovely and more temperate:/ Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May, / And summer's lease hath all too short a date" (Shakespeare and Atkins 68).

In addition, the sonnet points to feeling of love expressed simply and honestly, outside of the confines of courtly love prevalent at that time.

Sonnet 18 is “ both idealistic and yet familiar. The poet is speaking to someone with whom he feels comfortable and is clearly intimate... This is not the distant woman of some Petrarchan love poems” (Woolway 2).

The carefully selected words in Sonnet 18 locate the reader in a frame of mind. Not only does the reader feel the melody of phrases and enjoy them, they live them in their romantic relationships. Sonnet 18 is an example of a piece of literature that perfectly personifies the feeling of love, which may explain why it continues to be quoted regularly, nearly five hundred years after it was written.

The contribution that William Shakespeare made to contemporary theater therefore spans multiple areas. In addition, the power and immediacy of feelings and emotions reflected in William Shakespeare’s works on stage were some of the earliest honest portrayals of pain, love and vengeance.

The playwright opened up the treatment of character, revealed the power of language, and dramatized difficult human themes. Much of the contemporary theater remains rooted in the character, plot and thematic innovation that William Shakespeare created.

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