

Understanding theatre in the eyes of william shakespeare essay

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Understanding Theatre in the Eyes of William Shakespeare
The word theatre or stage performing arts is often associated with Shakespeare. His artistic ability in storytelling especially the themes of his plays inspired many playwrights. Some of his works, its themes and characters embody the social predicaments and situations during the time he created the masterpiece. Moreover it talks about the common human experience exploring human nature.

In Othello's case for example, the issue of race and religion and the revelation of the dark side of human nature is revealed and discussed through the characters. Themes and conflicts like jealousy, race, power, religious tensions, obsession and marriage illustrated in Othello are still important and experienced today. The characters in love, the characters in extreme emotions like obsession and jealousy and the characters who lose and win portray same emotions in reality and some other literature. The common human experience experienced by the characters of Othello, Desdemona and Iago makes this literature stereotype. Moreover, Shakespeare love incorporating the idea of tragic heroes as well. However what makes stereotyping in Shakespeare's literature unique and sophisticated is the creative structure of his stories and plays.

The uniqueness of his literature is manifested in the creativity of his play. In his play " King Lear", " Taming of the Shrew" and " Twelfth Night", Shakespeare used the theme appearance versus reality or the image of disguise to be useful in narrative as it significantly determines the destiny of his characters. Shakespeare uses an external or overt image of disguise. On

his both plays clothing and manner of bearing that suggest pretense seems to be a favorite device of Shakespeare. Clothing imagery that demonstrates pretense is featured prominently in plays such as “ King Lear” and “ The Taming of the Shrew.” Clothing in the past became an important expression of pretense since it is a big part of self as it expresses social position.

The mode of dressing and what constitutes the physical appearance in general define character and reputation. It is therefore not surprising that those characters in Shakespeare plays used physical appearances to disguise themselves effectively. Shakespearean heroes are always associated with tragedy who enjoys superior status and prosperity but possesses some inner weaknesses or flaws which leads to his or her downfall. Most of the time, they are noble and brave who will later experience emotional or inner turmoil that will greatly influence their future actions.

They impulsively make decisions out of logic and right rationality that often leads to destruction. The definition of tragedy and the unfortunate fate that Shakespeare incorporates to his heroes fulfill Aristotle’s definition and characterization of what a tragedy should be in his work Poetics. Basically the main concept of tragedy for Aristotle is that “ a great person should experience a reversal of fortune”. The play Othello perfectly matches the Aristotle’s concept of tragedy. Othello’s character is an example of an Aristotelian tragic hero. Aristotle went on to say that “ art should be an imitation of life and that art should be true to life”. In the art of tragedy,

Aristotle believes that tragedy must “ be complex rather than simple and “ should be a representation of terrible and piteous events”.

The human nature which includes their strengths and weaknesses are common human experience by everyone that makes the readers and viewers of the play relate to. Shakespeare’s play Othello explores very humanistic subjects like love, jealousy, pride, hate, trickery and racism that challenges the way an individual perceives his or her self and the world. The emotions illustrated by the characters are very familiar to everybody. The play is a tragedy about how human nature and the vulnerability of their emotions affect human relationships. It reminds the viewers through the character of Othello that even one’s good nature can be altered if one’s human deep relationship and emotional weaknesses are threatened.

When the character of Othello fell deeply in love with Desdemona, he started to become vulnerable to many frustrations despite his power and glory. Though love should bring about best attitudes and hopes but love also reveals fears and extreme emotions. Othello is basically a tragic character who irrationally reacts when love, as one of the weakest human emotions, is being threatened. Basing from Aristotle’s point of view, audience in a tragedy should observe a hero who is noble going from happiness to misery as a result of error on the part of the hero. The character of Othello created by Shakespeare has a superior status quo and prosperity in Venice even though he is culturally and racially outsider since he is a black man.

His skill as a soldier and as a leader brought him in full martial and political command of Cyprus. Though he is a subject to racial prejudice, he is indispensable to Venice by whom the duke and the senate have a high respect. Moreover, he is a commander who makes his own decisions.

These unique characteristics perhaps made Desdemona drawn to him. However, the high status quo acquired by Othello will soon deteriorate because aside from his bearing, Othello is naturally noble that sometimes exceeds. “Iago is most trustworthy” (Shakespeare 97). Othello naiveté and over trust to Iago will consequently lead to his downfall that perfectly fulfills Aristotle’s one characterization of a tragic hero. “Tragedy is the imitation of an action; and an action implies personal agents, who necessarily possess certain distinctive qualities both of character and thought; for it is by these that we qualify actions themselves, and these- thought and character- are the two natural causes from which actions spring, and on actions, again all success or failure depends.

...” Iago’s pretensions and lies easily persuaded Othello that he can be trusted not knowing that his trust with Iago will be the one to destroy him in the long run. Iago is consumed by self love and selfishness towards Othello’s power and position.

Iago, who is also the main protagonist of the play, supplies Othello with false evidence about his wife Desdemona’s unfaithfulness. His jealousy made him fixate his mind with Othello’s destruction. In addition, Iago’s obsession to re-establish his power and dominance after being wounded by Othello’s

promotion of being lieutenant also causes him to do everything to prove his superiority. Trust which is supposedly a virtue on Othello's side became his key to destruction. As a result of Othello's trusting nature, the antagonist's false accusations easily and effectively penetrates Othello's unsuspecting mind. Othello couldn't believe initially that Desdemona could be unfaithful to him but Iago, with his witty schemes, created false images in Othello's mind. In Act IV scene 1, Othello finally falls into an abstraction after falling victim once more to another Iago's malicious lies concerning the details of the imaginary affair between Desdemona and Cassio.

“ Lie on her? ...Zounds! ...

Noses, ears, and lips? Is't possible? -Confess? -Handkerchief-O devil!

(Shakespeare 199- 204) This statement of Othello illustrates that Iago finally convinced him of his malicious lies and on Othello's side, this is the start of his involvement into a tumult of sins and the start of realizations as well. Throughout the play however, the viewers will come into many realizations. Othello though has a higher position in the society has lots of deep insecurities. Othello is a black man who fell in love with a white woman Desdemona. When Iago gave malicious and false accusations against Desdemona, Othello responded with rage, revealing his awareness that his new found love with Desdemona was all but an illusion. The false pictures and images that Iago created on his mind reminded Othello that despite his power in the society, the reality that he is black man will always remain.

Othello's general conclusion that a black man and a white woman are unfit to become lovers uncovered his demonic tendencies. His insecurity made him doubt his wife completely which eventually destroyed his soul and morality at the end of the story. Hence, in a way, the story reflects a world that continually divides people according to race and culture which, in effect, influences human responses to love. At times, it manipulates their perspective towards love and relationship which can be destructive. Thus, as one of the most controversial issues regarding identity, racism is a persistent evil that encourages manipulation and jealousy. Othello's actions were purely motivated from his selfishness or too much love for himself.

The consequences are all defenses for himself—his naïve dream of his partnership to Desdemona shattered and his self denial about his identity as an inferior race. More than being jealous, the allegations of Desdemona's affair hurt his pride. He as a powerful, accomplished and moral at every possible way can not accept the reality that Desdemona can be unfaithful to him. In the end, Othello's jealousy and rage eventually caused him to kill Desdemona. In Shakespeare's King Lear, there are two defining characters who disguised themselves in order to fulfill particularly important goals: Edgar and Kent. Initially, Edgar was an innocent man and a gullible fool who was easily tricked by his illegitimate brother, Edmund.

Resenting his status as a bastard, Edmund plots to replace the fortunate position of his legitimate older brother Edgar under their earl father, Gloucester. Edmund effectively manipulates their father to believe in Edgar's

insincere intent of loyalty. Gloucester is completely taken in, believing Edmund's lies against his older son, Edgar.

As a result, he disinherits Edgar and proclaims him an outlaw. Meanwhile, Edgar, in order to escape his father's deadly wrath, is left with no choice but to conceal his identity for survival and self-preservation. To evade his father's men in punishing or killing him, Edmund disguises as a mad beggar and calls himself Poor Tom.

As soon as Edgar changes his expensive apparel into beggar-like clothing, all perceptions of his character shift as well. When he encounters his own father, Gloucester, and his godfather, King Lear, neither of them recognizes him even though behind his disguise, he is still Edgar in principle and character. It becomes apparent then that both King Lear and Gloucester are very quick to accept people at their face value without making further attempts to gain a deeper understanding of their character. The character of Kent is also a significant evidence of Shakespeare's use of disguise. Kent is another nobleman earl who is ever loyal and a true advisor to King Lear. King Lear, who is old enough to retire from power, decides to divide his royalty amongst his three beautiful daughters.

He offers the largest share to the one who loves him best. Goneril and Regan, who significantly give importance to position and royalty, proclaim passionately and with all hypocrisy that they love their father more than anyone and any material thing in this world. Their statements completely please the King. However, Cordelia, the King's youngest daughter, refuses to

flatter him exaggeratedly, displaying a mild and forbearing temperament. Cordelia's honest assertion annoys and offends the King. Easily persuaded by the hollowness of his two daughters' pretensions due to his blindness and wrong judgment of character, King Lear then decides to disinherit Cordelia and divides the kingdom only between the two.

Unable to stand by and watch the King's shallow and unfair treatment of his daughter any longer, Kent attempts to talk to him to let him realize the mistake of his decision. However, Kent's contradiction wounds his pride. Enraged, the King sends Kent out of the country and his royalty. Yet, the ever loyal and devoted Kent is determined to adhere to his master. He eventually decides to change his outer appearance by disguising himself as the servant Caius and aids King Lear with this position. When Lear initially encountered Kent disguised as Caius, he did not recognize him.

It is somehow inevitable to ask, how would the king not recognize him after almost his 40 years of service? Just like how King Lear approached Edgar, King Lear, without making any further attempts to gain a deeper understanding of Caius' inner character, quickly accepted Caius as a mere servant because of his apparel. If he made any effort to see through Caius, it would be easy for him to recognize that Caius is in fact his loyal friend Kent. Shakespeare eventually used the character of Kent as an "antic persona in order to function efficaciously in a fallen world" (Bennett 154). Moreover, Shakespeare used him as an affirmative or positive light to give hope and justice to some unfortunate fate and circumstances to King Lear's domain.

In the play “ The Taming of the Shrew,” Shakespeare develops themes of appearances by how disguises change the attitudes of the characters. Later on in the play, one would realize that “ disguises suggest that appearances cannot be relied upon” (McDonal, 161). Moreover, since the play is a comedy, Shakespeare used the idea of disguise to make it more appealing and more unpredictable. In the words of Russ McDonald, “[disguise is a] creation of realm in which the impossible becomes possible, in which change is beneficent and happiness attainable” (161). In The Taming of the Shrew, the characters are able to transform their appearance since they are trying to become someone else.

This play is a story within a story or literary work in which one story presents another story. The used of disguise is already evident in the introductory event called “ induction”. The drunkard named Sly is tricked by a lord into believing that he is a nobleman from the upper class because he is dressed and treated as one. The drunkard man feels flattered and immediately accepts his claimed royalty as he is dressed like one. However, later in the play, the most dominant form of deception is illustrated in the characters of Katherina and Bianca.

In the story, Katherina and Bianca are not what they appear to be. The theme of disguise used throughout the comedy is significant in understanding ultimately the real inner character of Bianca and Katherina. Initially, Katherina was depicted as a foul-tempered and sharp tongued, which is manifested in her degradation of the men around her and her consistent rudeness towards them. She was emotionally impulsive, and she

was prone to wild displays of anger. Later in the play, one would observe that the wild temper of Katherine is not inherent since she just acted wildly because she was miserable and unhappy.

Her father and even the society as a whole identify her as undesirable because she is unwilling to play the role of the maiden and vulnerable daughter. She does not want to conform to the society's constructed roles towards women in terms of domesticity and men's domination. However, when Petruccio came to her life, she eventually accepted that as a woman, she has the social role as a wife and as a mother.

Petruccio's effective approach transforms her immensely. Though Katherine repeatedly illustrated her defensive nature and repeatedly insulted him, Petruccio effectively wooed and tamed her by insisting that she is actually a woman of patience and gentleness. He perceives her positively.

Moreover, at the very beginning, Petruccio made her feel that she is equal with him intellectually, but on some level he forcibly treated Katherine in a way that would show her that as a woman, she has no choice but to adapt to the reality that she has the role to fulfill as a wife and a mother in the future. By following it, Katherine eventually gained respect and authoritative voice that she has been denied in the beginning. At the end of the play, the society was shocked to see the change in Katherine who has been tamed by her husband. Bianca, on the other hand, is the exact opposite of her sister Kate. She perfectly fulfills the role of a maiden-like and vulnerable woman at the time, which makes her appealing in the community. Her mild behavior,

princess-like apparels and large dowry cause every man in town to desire for her hand in marriage. However, Bianca is just putting up an act because in reality, she hates how the society gives her roles and thus manipulates her life. She only pretends that she freely and genuinely accepted the social roles to please her father ultimately.

However, at the end of the play, during the Banquet of Hortencio's wedding to a particular widow, some husbands stage a contest to see which of the wives in the banquet " will obey first when summoned, everyone expects Lucentio, Bianca's husband, to win" (" The Taming of the Shrew"). However, Bianca sends a message that she refuses to obey, but Katherina comes immediately. This illustrates how Shakespeare used disguise to confuse the viewers but to also let them realize that physical manifestations and appearance may mean disguise. Appearance is certainly not an assurance of reality. Through the characters of Bianca and Katherina, Shakespeare apparently illustrates the Renaissance Italy which promoted inequality of males and females by forcing the latter to adapt and conform to their submissive roles. Hence, The Taming of the Shrew satirizes silly and unfair customs and behaviors that favor males. In the play's final scene, due to their unpredictable characters, both Bianca and Hortensio's new wife, Katherina, ironically prove to be shrewish (" The Taming of the Shrew"). Shakespeare uses an external or overt image of disguise for the purpose of pretense.

In his play " Twelfth Night", the characters assumed physical disguises through change of clothing in an attempt to pass themselves off as someone

else. Disguise is a device often used by Shakespeare to add beauty and unpredictability in his literature. Viola, the main protagonist in the play, disguises herself in a man in order to acquire a job under the Duke of Illyria. Viola used the form of deception for the sake of survival after she was being separated with her twin brother in a shipwreck. In terms of advantages to the narrative, Viola's deception became a significant way for her to find love in the persona of the duke. Moreover by dressing Viola in male garments, Shakespeare creates sexual confusions because of the Olivia-Viola-Orsino love triangle. Apparently the decision of Viola to disguise like a man sets the entire narrative in motion.

Meanwhile, Feste impersonates Sir Topas who dresses like a priest every time he speaks to Malvolio after the man has been locked into the dark room. Feste wanted to assume a new identity through looking like Sir Topas who is a noble man. Malvolio on the other hand impersonates good person in the hopes of becoming a nobleman and rise out of his social class. Through disguises with the great help of clothing, the play raises questions of what makes human beings who they are. Can class and gender be easily altered with a change of clothing? Though deception apparently opposes people's sense of morality but the play primarily highlights that clothing sometimes identifies people.

Shakespeare commonly used the concept of disguise in order to establish mistaken identities so to complicate and tangle situations. Moreover, disguises in the form of clothing significantly alter the lives of the characters. Out of clothing, Shakespeare creatively reveals people's worldly nature.

People sometimes resort to deception or mistaken identity in order to achieve their desires of uplifting themselves. Shakespeare, just like you, celebrates fashion in his literature to reveal something about human beings.

Moreover, out of being a tragic hero, Shakespeare reveals the consequences of wickedness. Furthermore, he also illustrates the dark side of human nature and innate selfishness especially when being test by their extreme emotions.

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