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Shakespeare's Relevance in Modern Education

“To be or not to be?” that is the question in question. Many will recognize this iconic line from William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, as they have likely come across it in a high school English class. Shakespeare’s extraordinary plays have survived the test of time, but are they reaching their end? Many high school english teachers believe so. Even though William Shakespeare is specifically incorporated into the Common Core State standards which require students to, “analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in specific work (eg. how Shakespeare treats a theme from Ovid or the Bible or how a latter author draws on a play by Shakespeare)” (Cox). It is these teachers that have insinuated that William Shakespeare is no longer relevant to teens, or that the lexicon is unnecessarily challenging. Using pretexts such as childishness to debunk vital themes in plays such as *Romeo and Juliet* these teachers are robbing students of essential literature. Shakespeare’s work remain relevant through his extraordinary use of universal themes, which provide vital insight into human nature, by using an array of figurative language.

Love is one of the most common themes found in media, movies, and literature; especially the idea of young love. Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* speaks of passionate young love, validating it as true love. One of Shakespeare’s most important themes is that out of hate can arise love, a crucial contrast that remains relevant to teens today. The matter of the fact is

that many of Shakespeare's themes are just as important today as they were the day they were written. No one says it best than UTSA Professor, Alan Craven, in *Why Do We Still Care About Shakespeare?* when he states that the reason Shakespeare is found throughout high school English classes is due to the fact that "humans still experience love, loss, betrayal, war, humor and tragedy, which gives Shakespeare a foothold in modern times" (Tumiel). This cannot be truer. The revolutionary way that Shakespeare has incorporated comedy into tragedy and tragedy into comedy has impacted literature and mass media to do the same. This blending of polar themes, such as the love and hate found in *Romeo and Juliet*, began with Shakespeare. While it seems like modern ideas now, they were unheard of during Shakespeare's time. Shakespeare's themes have paved the way for future authors, who incorporate many of his themes into their works as well. Teaching this to students is beyond relevant, it is necessary for them to understand the backbone of literature and the way that Shakespeare has shaped society. The reason why Shakespeare's themes remain relevant, hundreds of years later, is with the help of his uncanny understanding of human behavior and psychology.

Shakespeare's characters have been iconized not by the popularity of his plays, but by their complexity. It is this that truly sets him apart from other authors and playwrights. Shakespeare has a way of expressing the turmoil, joy, pain, relief, angst, and anger in many of his characters, a quality that makes them transcend their roles as characters and portrays them as living human beings. It is this personification of his characters that makes them most memorable. For instance Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet* portrays a teenaged boy with intense feelings of love and of hate, of joy and of grief, and it is his polar emotions, which seem incapable of meeting in the middle, that makes Romeo the character we know and love. The psychology of each and

every one of his characters are carefully planned out and because of this the characters appear genuinely human. This is by far the most characterizing attribute found throughout Shakespeare's plays, and if for nothing else it is this that must remain relevant with students. Teachers should not be deterred by the complexity of Shakespeare's characters or the archaic language in which he brings them to life, in fact they should be even more motivated because of this.

The language may be the most important reason why it is vital for students to learn Shakespeare. Alan Craven a college professor who has 50 years of experience in teaching Shakespeare to undergraduates at UTSA states that, "The language is rich, the characters are complex, and many of his basic theme- love, treachery, honor, bravely, and political intrigue- still resonate today" (Tumiel). Besides the themes that Craven reiterates are contemporarily present, it happens that Shakespeare incorporates many of the language that we use today. The problem with teachers not wanting to teach Shakespeare is the complex lexicon in which his dire themes are portrayed. It has frustrated many teachers and students to the point where they do not want to teach or learn Shakespeare anymore. It takes a certain amount of skill to understand Shakespeare, but it is for that very reason why it is essential to teach Shakespeare to teens. If they are capable of reading and understanding one of Shakespeare's 38 plays (Burton) then they will have no problem understanding whatever else follows. Teachers must incorporate Shakespeare into their curriculum not because it is easy but because it is hard. The challenge that Shakespeare's writing poses serves as the very reason why it must be taught and why it remains relevant.

Opponents of these ideals criticize Shakespeare's work because they feel that there are other literary works that portray the same themes with easier vocabulary. The very reason why there are modern authors with the same themes as Shakespeare is because of Shakespeare himself. He has influenced society and culture to this very day. The reason Shakespeare is so great is because of his wide use of figurative language, which no author can compare to. The complex dramatic irony, foreshadowing, extended metaphor, soliloquies, oxymorons, etc. found in a single play bring about his literary texts to life. It is this that makes Shakespeare unlike other authors, this is why Shakespeare remains relevant.

For example in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, "Brutus's wife Portia insists upon her right to comfort her husband and reveals a wound she has given herself as an act of radical empathy... By the scene's end, Brutus... is convinced to share with her 'all the charactery of [his] sad brows.' Portia's speech offers an important supplement, a lesson in persuasive speech certainly, but also a lesson in empathy, gender, and politics. And it is precisely this kind of complexity and richness that demonstrates why Shakespeare's works continue to serve as the spine of American high school English" (Burton) states Jonathan Burton a professor at Whittier college.

The importance of Shakespeare and his plays remains relevant and alive today, with that stated it is vital for students to learn the complexity of Shakespeare's plays in high school english classes.

The thematic lessons Shakespeare teaches his audience, through his vibrant characters, and complex lexicon proves to show not only the relevance but the importance of his plays. Shakespeare is known as one of the greatest writers of all time because of his complex understanding of human nature and the way he sows it into his characters. This has proved

valuable for other authors who base their own writing on that of Shakespeare. It is the multiple influences that Shakespeare's plays have had on others that fortifies his foothold on society, because of this it is a person's right to know why the world around them is as it is, and how Shakespeare has had a huge impact on its formation.

Works Cited

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