



Research Paper

William Shakespeare-a Great Musician in English Literature

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Abstract

“If music is the food of love play on” is a famous opening line of William Shakespeare’s famous comedy ‘Twelfth Night’. William Shakespeare, a great dramatist of Elizabethan age, proved himself a great musician by introducing beautiful songs and sonnets in his various plays. This has given a prop to his plays and appealed more to the masses. Music, the universal language of mankind, has power to relieve man from the day to day tedious jobs. It rejuvenates man and takes him to the flight of mental and spiritual relief. It soothes our hearts and fills it with immense pleasure. This paper minutely scrutinizes the importance of music in the plays of William Shakespeare. It shows how songs and sonnets have added more charm and magnificence to his plays.

Key Words: Music, William Shakespeare, Songs, Sonnets.

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I. Introduction

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is an acclaimed and renowned dramatist of all times. He occupies a unique position in the whole world in literary arena. In the words of George Lythleton, “No other dramatist (author) has ever so copious, so bold, so creative in imagination with so perfect a knowledge of the passions, of the humors and sentiments of mankind. He painted all the characters from kings down to peasants, with equal truth and equal force if human nature were destroyed and no monuments were left of it except his works, other things know what man was from those writings.”^{1st}

It is a universal truth that no other poet or dramatist has received such universal recognition and fame as Shakespeare does. The miraculous charm and immortal appeal of Shakespeare’s plays is due to the latent variety in it. All the plays of Shakespeare reflect the life, manners and customs of England of his own time. The England finds a reflection in Shakespeare’s plays. It witnessed the golden period in the history of England. The social, intellectual and imaginative forces were doing their best and the revival of learning was in the full swing. Songs have been the important part of Shakespeare’s plays. The effect of Renaissance and the Reformation reached its heights during this time. Freedom of thoughts and liberty of private judgments in religious matters also contributed enormously. This was an age of peace and prosperity. The professional companies that put on Shakespeare’s plays on stage or public theatres worked with meager musical resources. Though the audience was charmed with the musicality but such content was hardly appreciated by the dramatists. It was Shakespeare who realized its importance and added it with distinct flavors in his plays.

The people of England were fond of all kinds of dramas. Shakespeare assigned the job of singing to clowns, fools, rouges, minor characters and even to the protagonist. In ‘The Tempest’ we find the same example when Ariel sang song in Scene 2 of Act 1as

“Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea- change
Into something rich and strange.”^{2nd}

Literature is referred as the mirror of society. The day to day happenings of life are truthfully depicted in literature. It also soothes people mind and fill them with energy and innovative thoughts. Literature has the power to take people in an imaginary land where they get totally relaxed from the trials and tribulations of their daily life. Literature helps people to take refuge in the beauty of nature and rejuvenates them in the open lap of

mother earth. In the plays of Shakespeare we find music, song and dance with mythological and allegorical figures. Most of his plays are full of visual and musical effects. The beauty of his plays has been extended to an indefinable extent with the usage of music and song. His plays are the role model voicing in them the strong relationship being shared by music and literature. One of the most important characteristics of Shakespeare's dramatic genius is an undefinable alertness and mobility of thoughts and presentation. The plays of Shakespeare are enough to reflect his keen insight into human nature. Music and songs have been used as an aid to reach to the emotional heights in his most of the famous works.

Shakespeare did justice to all characters whether major or minor. Even the minor characters successfully caste indelible impression which we carry in our hearts. The whole world of Shakespeare's characters persuades audiences and readers, to an extent that they consider them as real characters, breathing and living with flesh and blood. Shakespeare's greatest genius lies in his deep insight into human nature and high imagination. His imagination knows no boundaries. There is no human experience which is left by Shakespeare to portray in his plays. It is only his high imagination that the world of spirits lay open to him like the world of real men and women. He has given them body and a name and made them immortal to his readers. Shakespeare is versatile in his universality. He is not of one land but of the whole world. The gift of universality alone, gives permanence to his literature. As Ben Johnson has applauded Shakespeare, "He was not of an age, but for all time!

Nature herself was proud of his designs
And joy'd to wear the dressing of his lines'
Which were so richly spun, and woven so fit,
As, since, she will vouchsafe no other wit." 3rd

Thus the appeal that Shakespeare's characters make to human heart is everlasting. His plays are considered to be a great river of life and beauty. The vast work of Shakespeare makes it clear that he does not possess a definite philosophy of life. He is neither a pessimist like Thomas Hardy nor an absolute optimist like Robert Browning. He is an objective observer of life. For him, "There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so". 4th His observations are true to life and can move us to think about the mysteries of life. For him life is neither absolutely good nor bad but a mixture of good and evil. He is not the didactic writer. He does not preach but puts the mirror of our lives before us exactly as it is and leaves on us to judge. Shakespeare is a great humourist but his humour is different from the modern idea of humour. In the days of Shakespeare humour meant a physiological phenomenon rather than psychological as is considered now a days. His songs have been presented as a medium to convey humour. At times serious and grave messages are also conveyed through songs and music.

Shakespeare shows his great devotion to the subject of love in his dramas. Nearly all the characters are true to their counterparts. We see the faithful love of Desdemona for Othello, Miranda for Ferdinand etc. This type of ideal love inspires the readers of Shakespeare to adore him for such a highly glorified conception and ideal love. In his plots Shakespeare is never original. Generally, He borrows stories from his predecessors but he exercises superb art in these old plots and present them with greater vigour than their original masters did. The plots of Shakespeare are simple and compact, though the fact remains that he employs sub- plots, along with the main plots. But he welds the sub- plots to main plots in as such a good manner that they give impression to the unity of main action. A harmony between the characters and the events can also be seen in his plots. In brief he is a good master in building exceptionally excellent plots.

The language employed by Shakespeare in his plays is grand and majestic. It is a fact that his command of language and the magic of expression cannot be easily surpassed. He is also credited to give new shape and form to English language. As Natnael Solomon commented-

"Shakespeare was writing at a time when the English language was undergoing a major metamorphosis. It is not a huge stretch to argue that in many cases while Shakespeare was writing, he was simply making it up as he went along, creating new words, phrases, and constructing new standards in grammar and structure. The evolution of Middle English to early modern was shaped by writers such as Shakespeare, who greatly added to vocabulary by not only coining completely original words but by changing verbs to nouns (or vice-versa), connecting words together in new ways, or adding suffixes and prefixes to existing words (Mabillard, 2000). Estimates as to exactly how many words Shakespeare personally added to the English language vary, but there is general agreement that we still commonly use 1,700 words that he created (McQuain and Malles, 1998)." 5th

Shakespeare employs both rhyme and prose in his plays. He uses rhyme in moments of great emotions. It constantly reminds us that a play is fiction and not a reality. The use of blank- verse and rhymed couplet is very frequent in Shakespeare. Blank- verse as used by Shakespeare creates an illusion of reality. Besides rhyme Shakespeare puts prose as a medium of conversational expression. He uses prose in letters, proclamations,

documents etc. As far as the style of Shakespeare is concerned it is not extremely elevated or poetic but it is strong, precise and individual. With his style Shakespeare can encompass the world of human emotions.

II. Discussion

Music plays a significant role in the plays of William Shakespeare. He beautifies the plot by including incidence and episodes of song, dance and music which in return aggravates the emotions, passions and feelings of audience. His music in the plays is quite different from his music in the sonnets. In the plays his songs appeared in the main text itself. 'As You like It', a pastoral comedy, published in 1623 contains several beautiful songs. Under the Greenwood Tree is among the most famous songs of the play it appeared in act 2 scene 5. The lines are

"Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me,
And tune his merry note
Unto the sweet bird's throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither:
Here shall he see
No enemy
But winter and rough weather." 6th

The Forest of Arden and the romantic settings given to the song added feather to its cap. The first phrase 'Under the Greenwood Tree' for the first time appeared in Robin Hood Ballads. Amiens lot, who follows Duke Senior, sings the song, rejoicing the blessings of the woods and encouraging people to leave the materialistic of world of the court and take refuge in the paradise of the forest. He wants the ambitious men to shun their useless and futile desires of gaining materialistic possessions. He suggests to give up the efforts to win power and position in the society instead people should prefer to live a simple life full of blessings in the woods.

Jaques, the pessimist, provides the final verse in counterpoint to Amiens' earlier verses. He calls it a silly mistake to move to woods while leaving all the wealth and ease. Thus even the songs convey graver messages in his plays. Songs definitely works as the tension busters by creating the soothing environment around us but even then these songs did not fail to arrest our attention towards the deeper meaning of life. The sweet and melodious songs of the birds invite people for merriment and entertainment. Without the hustle and bustle of city life, people could live easily and happily in the woods. The healthy natural environment definitely helps in building strong body and mind.

The bombastic opening lines of the play 'Twelfth Night' are beautiful sung by Shakespeare's mouthpiece, Duke Orsino. The line begins an extended metaphor comparing music to food. The lines declare music as food for love. To satisfy his appetite for love, Duke orders for music. Duke feels that more music will cure him of his obsessive love for Countess Olivia. The lines are:

"If music be the food of love, play on;
Give me excess of it, that, surfeiting,
The appetite may sicken, and so die.
That strain again! It had a dying fall;
O, it came over my ear like the sweet sound,
That breathes upon a bank of violets,
Stealing and giving odour! Enough; no more:
'Tis not so sweet now as it was before." 7th

In the opening of Duke Orsino it has been explained that as diamond cuts diamond similarly his insatiable hunger for love will definitely dry up in the presence of music.

Shakespeare evoked mood through the beautiful use of vocal music. He has also provided ironical commentary on plot or character through the device of songs. "The professional companies that put on plays in the public theatres worked with much-reduced musical resources. Normally, one boy actor could sing and perhaps play an instrument. Adult actors, especially those specializing in clown roles, sang as well. A special musical-comic genre, the jigg, was the particular domain of the great Shakespearean comedians Richard Tarlton and William Kempe." 8th

In 'Twelfth Night', "O mistress," sung by Robert Armin in the role of Feste, is directed toward the aging Sir Toby Belch and Sir Andrew Aguecheek; the lyrics touch on all the themes of the play and even hint at Viola's transgendered disguise in the phrase "that can sing both high and low." The magical and ritual uses of song are also beautifully sung in some plays as 'A Midsummer Night's Dream', 'The Tempest', and 'Macbeth'.

Most significantly, Ophelia in 'Hamlet' snatches the folk song demonstrates the regressive breakdown of her personality. The only other Shakespeare heroine who sings is Desdemona in 'Othello'. To overwhelming

effect, she sings a popular tune, “The Willow Song”—for which 16th-century words and music exist—just before she is murdered by Othello. In King Lear Edgar feigns madness by singing snatches of folk song.

There are variety of songs which appeared in the plays like parts songs, serenades, rounds and catches. Most of the songs represent the real life in England during Renaissance. Several musical instruments have been used by Shakespeare to give more musicality to the play. He used trumpet, oboe, flute, recorders, violin and lute.

A few plays, notably ‘Romeo and Juliet’, ‘The Two Gentlemen of Verona’, and ‘Cymbeline’, indicate specific consorts (ensembles) of instruments. Small onstage bands accompanied serenades, dances, and masques are beautifully presented in the plays of Shakespeare. Certain instruments had symbolic significance for Elizabethans. Hoboys (oboes) were ill winds that blew no good; their sounds presaged doom or disaster. They announced the evil and ill band in ‘Titus Andronicus’ and ‘Macbeth’. Hoboys provided a grim and serious picture which eventually gives force to the dumb show in ‘Hamlet’. The sounds of the lute and violin were considered as a symbol of providing immense force to the human spirits. Songs rubbed sadness, dejections and melancholy by transforming it into exquisite art. Along with vocal music we find the magical use of music and different musical instruments in the plays of Shakespeare. Nothing has been remained untouched with the pen of Shakespeare he has included the folk song, rhymes, ballads, sonnets and many other forms in his plays. Scraps of these tunes were used to create in-jokes and to evoke other sentiments as well.

III. Conclusion

William Shakespeare penned some of the greatest songs ever written in English Literature. We explore the operas, ballets, overtures, incidental music, tone poems, choral works and songs born out of his writing. The songs in his plays have sought the attention of the entire world. Shakespeare used vocal music to evoke mood, to provide ironic commentary on plot or character, to retain interest of his audience and to entertain them. Shakespeare has written most of the songs and few he has incorporated from the other literature including folk songs popular in the contemporary society. He didn’t hesitate in taking material from other sources but the touch of Shakespeare gives new and novel shape to the existing content.

Mendelssohn wrote music for Shakespeare's play ‘A Midsummer Night's Dream’ on two separate occasions in 1826 and then in 1842. He talked about 70 songs in the plays of Shakespeare and really wrote up everything that was known about the original songs and tunes, and the settings over the centuries, since Shakespeare's day as well. It is a matter of fact that Shakespeare has composed most of his songs and lyrics but along with that he has also gathered material from other existing literature.

Music can raise someone's mood, get them excited, or make them calm and relaxed. Music enraptures us in a magnificent world full of emotions and passions. The possibilities are endless. Interestingly, music affects people physically and mentally. The melodious music can appeal people eternally. The soothing effect of music and songs can never be denied. It is an acclaimed fact that songs provide blissful atmosphere and gives us immense possibility to raise us as an individual. Music has been proved to have various positive impacts on the body: it can have a therapeutic effect against pain, modify blood-pressure, rid the body syndromes and help in fighting in many mental and psychic diseases thus music plays important role in literature and human life. William Shakespeare has used this tool with great expertise in his plays and undoubtedly proved himself a great musician in English literature.

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