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Shakespeare's Lasting Impact on Literature

By Tammy Whynot

When reflecting upon the influence of Shakespeare's plays on literature, it is striking that there seems to be hardly a lone segment of English literary history untouched by the hand of the Bard. Scholars have examined his impact upon the works of giants such as Goethe, Voltaire, Byron, Milton, Keats, Dickens and Faulkner; his plots have been re-interpreted over and again, seen in recent decades in modern stories for young adults such as *West Side Story* and *The Twilight Saga*.

Shakespeare's works are dominated by classic narrative structures that, although not invented by Shakespeare, were arguably applied better by him than any author since. Chief among these are the heroic or romantic tragi-comedy. In the heroic plot, a social power is disrupted, perhaps by the overthrowing of a king or an invasion; in the romantic plot, lovers meet, fall into a conflict, and are separated (Hogan, 2006). The key difference between a tragedy and a comedy in either case is the resolution: in a comedy, lovers are reunited or political

stability restored; in a tragedy, lovers are forever parted or heroes die (Hogan, 2006). When written well, these classic plots resonate with audiences as they are full of emotion, adventure, and very human and universal problems.

It is not only the stories themselves which have caused Shakespeare's works to remain popular for centuries, but the manner in which they are told—the style and form of their composition. Within the classic plots we see strong characters and voices that “plead, cajole, reason, threaten and debate” (McEvoy, 2005, p. 409). Through Shakespeare's use of symmetry, metaphor, and rhetorical questions, the people who inhabit his works practically leap off the pages, speaking to us in passionate and vivid verse. By symmetry, we mean more than simple repetition, but a style of strong phrasing that brings attention to a particular character by making their speeches more compelling. Metaphor, for which Shakespeare is famous, is where we see rich imagery and creative turns of phrase; rhetorical questions are those questions which draw the reader in and engage them in the dialogue (McEvoy, 2005).

Through reading Shakespeare, we may not only re-visit classic plots and be captivated by sweeping language, but we may learn the lesson that, as stated by Shakespearean scholars Bly and Hartley, “it's possible to be a populist without sacrificing truth, seriousness or subtlety, even when the story is comic or horrific” (Bly and Hartley, 2006). This lesson is particularly relevant when examining popular young adult fiction, which critics may deride as re-hashing plots and valuing marketability over depth or literary content.

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Shakespearean Dictionary

By Tammy Whynot

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 crafting 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 Malless, 1998). Below is a listing of words that are undoubtedly familiar to teens, followed by the quotation and play in which they first appeared.

Advertising (adjective)

“advertising and holy to your business”

Measure for Measure

Amazement (noun)

“wild amazement hurries up and down”

King John

Bedroom (noun)

“then by your side, no bed-room me deny”

A Midsummer Night's Dream

Drug (verb)

“I have drug'd their possets”

Macbeth