

# Portraits of Human Virtue in Shakespeare: The Sterling and the Sublime

Joshua J. John

Research Scholar, (Ph.D) Karunya University, Coimbatore

## ABSTRACT

*Shakespeare stands poet par excellence and remains unparalleled in the literary history of poetry. Continual suffering had made him say the prayer of saints. Had not Shakespeare suffered like that such poetry would not have been produced. The generative, creative gifted poet had left no stones unturned in order to record the human drama of life. The bright, the colourful, the fashionable, the passing and the fleeting, the pleasure and the pain, the unknown to the known, the familiar and the vague, a collection of the historical and prediction of the futuristic still to happen, a wisdom unfathomed to the simple and foolish. It is a storehouse of the nuggets of gold, a treasure chest of a pristine chamber of the noble and the sublime which portrays the impeccable virtues.*

**Keywords:** *virtues- fortitude- forgiveness- humility- love – compassion- courage – endurance – divine – mercy- the meek- the pardoning – wisdom sterling- sublime.*

## Introduction :

Virtue means moral excellence. Integrity and righteousness are synonymous with virtue. The character and the personality of a person flowers best in their possession of virtue and realistic attitude towards life. Virtue is an inner beauty which has a gem like glow and radiates outside the flame of steadfastness and fortitude. Fortitude is the strength of mind to bear pain and suffering with courage. The inner beauty gives one, more strength and courage. Courage is the ladder on which all other virtues mount. In a broader sense, virtue is the embodiment of the highest morality. Sterling qualities are true virtues and great virtues are sublime and unmatched in their state.

Hunger and disease, poverty and ingratitude, loss of dear ones, disappointment in love, frustration in one's ambition or aspiration – all these form part of a thousand ills that flesh is heir to. It is only the brave and virtuous who can fight these evils without submitting to them. Fortitude is the virtue of adversity, makes a Man master of his fate and makes his life sublime. Poetry is language at its most exuberant and at its most disciplined, and that one could not attempt to have the one without the other. This Paper focuses on the great human virtues expressed by way of employing the right characters and by providing the right themes. .

Man's power of endurance and fortitude are virtues which are called into action

only when he is in a perilous situation. Poets have taken fancy about personifying good things and great virtues as if they were living and having life and feelings. An ancient writer had personified wisdom like: "You are the wise people and wisdom shall die with you". Talking about the quality of mercy, Shakespeare, in a sonnet, states that the quality of mercy is not stained. Mercy is thus a divine quality and a virtue which belongs to God Himself. It is the quality of the all-compassionate Almighty Himself. Those who possess such divine quality is partaking in the Divine by reaching out to the divine. Blake had said that pity has a human face and mercy has a human heart.

Poets surpass age and years it is inspiring to find that extraordinary wealth of writers, artists and poets have contributed their best to Mankind. To live among such philosophers and poets, one must feel privileged and honoured. It is a great thing to have the company of the noble souls. It is one thing to live in the same era of such great people and it is an amazing thing that their works live through the years and centuries. His poetry, sure enough, surpasses beyond comparison to any of the writings. Poetry was overflowing with Shakespeare in most of the touching and sentimental areas and as such influenced many hundreds of writers and stirred up the awe and inspiration of a million reading audience. He lived among men portraying their characters and his poetry now lives in the hearts of the people. His poetry provided the necessary comfort and relief for the souls distressed. The poems readily

offered knowledge and wisdom needed for all people as he had dealt with many a character including the King to the common Man. There were also an alarm of alert sounded through his poems to awaken the hearts and minds of the ignorant and the innocent. It is by this act that the eyes and ears of such host of people get opened to the stark realities of life. It gives the reader an eminently enjoyable reading experience. The poet- craftsman had given an exquisite shape for the feelings and emotions to the poetry's heroes and heroines. For any lover of poetry and, for anyone interested in further sensitizing their response to language, the poems are like honey in a dry land, quenching their thirst for the aesthetic and the intellect.

Characters representing the melancholic and the remorse, apologetic and the repentant, the rueful and the diffident, the morose and the cheerful, the meek and the furious, the pardoning and the vengeful, the merry and the joyful – all have found a place in the poetry of the great bard. In sharp contrast to the great virtues and the highest morality, there appears the mean and vile, the depraved and despicable, the hateful and the disgusting, the evil and the wicked, the Vicious or the Ungenerous. It does not matter, whether it is the joyous positive or the despairing negative - whichever is running at the moment dominates the mood of the reader. Conversely, the closing of a door can be a sad and final thing - the opening a wonderfully joyous moment: this applies to all the tragedies, comedies and the tragic-comedies.

Shakespeare's works have made a lasting impression on literature and on later theatre. Feelings can never be fettered by shackles the chains can never hold the innate overflowing powerful desires of the poet. The poet goes on to probe into the deepest regions and realms where normal people could never tread upon. The poets reach out to the unknown territories that ever could be not imagined nor could be conceived by the human mind by running wild their imagination. In 'Macbeth', the shortest and most compressed of Shakespeare's tragedies, uncontrollable ambition incites Macbeth and his wife, Lady Macbeth, to murder the rightful king and usurp the throne, until their own guilt destroys them in turn. We see the emphatic pronouncement by Lady Macbeth after the murder of King Duncan stating,

"All the perfumes of Arabia cannot sweeten this little hand:

"All great Neptune's ocean cannot wash clean this hand."

Aspiring for greatness is no wrong but the means to achieve it is all the more important. Here the Macbeths fail miserably by not upholding the sublime virtues.

*Pity* by William Blake, 1795, is an illustration of two similes in *Macbeth*:

"And pity, like a naked new-born babe,

Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim,  
hors'd

Upon the sightless couriers of the air."

[de Sélincourt 1909, 174]

Alexander Pope, in his 'Dunciad' says, "lispings the numbers came" [l.125-128] to him; That describes the extraordinary talent and unparalleled gifts of the poet. This poem, taking the form of a verse letter from Pope to his friend and physician John Arbuthnot, spells out Pope's satirical principles and declares how he would like them to be interpreted. Such is the powerful overflow of thoughts of the imagination of the poet which are at once spontaneous and indigenous. Shakespeare is one such fine example who when he lisp'd, the numbers flowed freely and fairly and forcefully uninterrupted. He envisioned everyman living on this earth to be part of the great human drama called 'Life'.

"All the world's a stage,

and all the men and women merely players:

they have their exits and their entrances;

and one man in his time plays many parts ..."

—As *You Like It*, Act II, Scene 7, 139–42

Adversity is the best discoverer of virtue in Man. And virtue is like a precious odour and a sweet aroma of fragrance when they are incensed and crushed. In *Othello*, the villain Iago stokes Othello's sexual jealousy to the point where he murders his innocent wife who loves him.<sup>[107]</sup> In *King Lear*, the old king commits the tragic error of giving up his powers, initiating the events which lead to the torture and blinding of the Earl of Gloucester and the murder of Lear's youngest daughter Cordelia. Evil passions have an overpowering impact over

human heart. It is wrong to lose control or allow evil passions mastery over us. A sheltered and cloistered virtue is not a real virtue. Virtue deserves to be called virtue only when it can resist and overcome temptation. 'Forgiveness' is a sublime virtue which could be found in quite a few plays of Shakespeare. 'The Winter's Tale' is one such soft expression for exhibiting the sublime virtues.

#### *The Noble, The Righteous And The Virtuous:*

The poet's careful technique has led to a wild surprise as he seeks to employ those sterling values in his poetry. The plots of Shakespeare's tragedies often hinge on such fatal errors or flaws, which overturn order and destroy the hero and those he loves. Catholic Beliefs and Teachings define the cardinal virtues are the four principal moral virtues. All other virtues hinge on these four: prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. Characters bright and winning persuade us towards virtue and virtue alone makes our lives sublime.

Few immortal lines from his poems substantiate the fact that the virtues mentioned in his poems are sterling and sublime, whether it is cardinal or sublime.

#### **Conclusion:**

Shakespeare's works have proved to be timeless and enduring as they have withstood the test of time. Centuries have gone by but the works of the poet have remained enduring. "That King Shakespeare," the essayist Thomas Carlyle

wrote in 1840, "does not he shine, in crowned sovereignty, over us all, as the noblest, gentlest, yet strongest of rallying signs; indestructible". [Carlyle 1907, 161]. Shakespeare combined poetic genius with a practical sense of theology and philosophy. Aging vexes and debilitates a very jubilant personality. The writer's euphoria and exhilaration knows no bounds when he treads upon the final point of the pinnacle of his successful writing. When there is a loud acclamation of appreciation and a wide spread welcome for his own writings the poet enters into an arena where normal human beings do not dare to tread upon. That is where poetry turns to be the music of the soul which helps to overcome the anguish and despair of the dejected soul. Age could not wither the beauty of the poems of Shakespeare. It's a delightful realm when read, a timeless treasure of joy and beauty. They are undeniably excellent and exquisitely magnificent. There is not a shadow of any doubt that these are virtues which are sterling and the sublime.

#### **References**

Rowse, A. L. (1963). *William Shakespeare: A Biography*. London: Macmillan. ISBN 0-06-013710-X

Harold Bloom (2006). *Shakespeare Through the Ages: King Lear*, p. xii.

Gross, John, 'Shakespeare's Influence' in Wells & Orlin 2003, 641-2.

'William Shakespeare Featured Article'. The genealogist.co.uk. Retrieved 19 March 2014. The Norton Anthology of English

Literature: Sixteenth/Early Seventeenth Century, Volume B, 2012, pg. 1168

Shakespeare, William (1914), *The Oxford Shakespeare: the Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Bartleby.com (2000) ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, retrieved 22 June 2007.

Carlyle, Thomas (1907), Adams, John Chester, ed., *On Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History*, Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, ISBN 1-4069-4419-X, OCLC 643782.

#### References:

Russ, *Shakespeare: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, 1945–2000, Oxford: Blackwell, ISBN 0-631-23488-8.

Wood, Manley, ed. (1806), *The Plays of William Shakespeare with Notes of Various Commentators*, I, London: George Kearsley, retrieved 27 December 2013.

Shapiro, James (2005), *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*, London: Faber and Faber, ISBN 0-571-21480-0.

Rowe, Nicholas (1709), Gray, Terry A., ed., *Some Account of the Life &c. of Mr.*

*William Shakespear* (published 1997), retrieved 30 July 2007.

Kermode, Frank (2004), *The Age of Shakespeare*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, ISBN 0-297-84881-X

Dutton, Richard; Howard, Jean (2003), *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works: The Histories*, Oxford: Blackwell, ISBN 0-631-22633-8.

de Sélincourt, Basil (1909), *William Blake*, London: Duckworth & co.

Craig, Leon Harold (2003), *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's "Macbeth" and "King Lear"*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, ISBN 0-8020-8605-5.

-[- (2005a), *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art: Collected Essays*, New York: Routledge, ISBN 0-415-35278-9.

Bradley, A. C. (1991), *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth*, London: Penguin, ISBN 0-14-053019-3.

Bate, Jonathan (2008), *The Soul of the Age*, London: Penguin, ISBN 978-0-670-91482-1.