

## The Poetic Beauty of Shakespearean Plays

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The first emphatic effect of civilization appears in the form of differentiation of the human sensibility - the gradual separation of intellect, emotion and imagination which means a shrinkage of the poetic empire with the rise and growth of prose which becomes the medium for the expression of the critical, scientific and philosophical thoughts and speculations. The history of poetry is a record of its remarkable adaptability to the changing environments and intellectual climate, which has ensured its survival, though it could not prevent the progressive contraction of its area of operation and influence. So long as the culture is predominantly rural, the love of poetry remains more or less genuine.

Shakespeare's age was remarkable for its love of music and song, which was common to all classes and categories of people:

*.the man who hath no music in himself,  
Nor is not moved by concord of sweet sounds,  
Is fit for treason, stratagem and strife,  
Let no such man be trusted.*

Shakespeare shows his genius in the use of songs also, in as much as with the progress of his dramatic art, the songs are increasingly integrated with the structure of the plays and are made functional. The song in *The Merchant of Venice*, for instance, "Tell me where is fancy bred" is

summoned at a crucial point in the casket story and purports to be a justification for keeping the portrait of the heroine in the leaden casket and a clear hint to be favoured suitor than he should not be led away by the false testimony of his eyes. In the *Twelfth Night*, the use of songs has become more diversified and complex. The fool Feste is musical as well as remarkably shrewd in judging the character of his audience and adapting his song to the taste of the company. The songs, therefore, effectively contribute to the peculiar atmosphere of the play and throw light on the character of the singer himself as well as of the audience which is being entertained. In *As You Like It*, the dramatist conveys the ambivalence of his attitude to the Arcadian life which the courtiers are content to lead in the forest of Arden. The song sung by Amiens, "Blow, blow thou winter wind" is a charming and ingenious expression of that contentment which is a way of reconciling them to their lot, as well as an effective contribution to the revival of the spirit of the golden age. But its parody by the melancholy Jacques is an ironical comment on the latent absurdity of that illusion, which is fully supported by the subsequent behaviour of the banished Duke and his self-exiled courtiers, who are in a hurry to rush back to their sophisticated life at the court without wasting a word of regret for the sweet life they were leaving behind.

The songs in the tragedies are more psychological. The tender 'willow song'

which poor Desdemona summons is the concentrated essence of her natural purity and all the pathos of her situation. More significant still are the snatches of songs by poor Ophelia in her madness, occasioned obviously and immediately by the sudden murder of her father. They centre around two themes - firstly, the pathos of her old father's wanton murder, and secondly the treachery of the young men who desert their lady-loves after violating their maiden modesty. The first theme is easy to grasp and ennobles her tender and loving nature; but the second fact, a young maiden singing ribald songs in her madness is harder and more complex. Coleridge opined that these songs really give expression to the suspicion regarding the intention of Ophelia's princely lover which her too cautious and politic father had dinned into her ears. Fear, thus aroused was further confirmed by the old songs about the ways of the young, hot-blooded lovers with indiscreet girls, which Ophelia may have learnt from her nurses and servants. In the moment of uninhibited freedom in madness the repressed fear is automatically released in the conventional song. L.C. Knights observes that *Macbeth* should not merely be studied as poetic drama but as dramatic poems as well. A set of images occurring throughout *Macbeth* are those of light and darkness. Characters align evil with darkness and light with health and goodness. When Macbeth first conceives of murdering Duncan in order to claim the crown he is painfully conscious of the evil character of his designs:

*Stars hide your fires;  
Let not light see my black and deep desires.*

Lady Macbeth also knows that her plans are aligned with the forces of darkness when she invites:

*Come thick night,  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell.*

Just before the murder of Duncan, Banquo observes the

unnatural darkness of the night and declares:

*There's husbandry in heaven,  
Their candles are all out.*

In the romances, music and song have assumed a more spiritual complexion. There are many incarnations to spirituality owing to the complex human nature and existence, which Shakespeare expounds through his multifarious characters in each of his plays. The idea of heaven in mercy is tersely held out by Portia in *Merchant of Venice* as she articulates, at the nick of time, to save, justice, to save man from sin:

*It is an attitude to God himself;  
And earthly power doth then  
show likest God's*

*When mercy seasons justice.*

Shakespeare exalts the state of being human and human birth when Miranda exclaims in *The Tempest*:

*O, wonder!*

*How many goodly creatures  
are there here!*

*How beauteous mankind is!*

*O brave new world,*

*That has such people in it!*

Shakespeare urges us to realise the nothingness of this life so that the realisation will bring forth everything he craves for - first, peace of mind. The honesty which man kills, often because of his selfish nature, the Bard says, is a sustainable trade even in the most trying of circumstances as in *All Is Well That Ends Well*, when Mariana says to Diana that confiding honesty will save her from the rogue earl:

*Well, Diana, take heed of this French earl:*

*The honour of a maid is her name;  
And no legacy is so rich as honesty.*

Shakespeare's ultimate spiritual nature is evident in the utterings of Hamlet. His sufferings ring out of the philosophy of ephemeral life and nobility of mind to face up the misfortunes and this is the

consummation. The elimination of the space between life and death, the ruing and the rumination, the chaos and the cosmos, the micro and the macro - they all come together in Hamlet's Soliloquy:

*To be, or not to be: that is the question:*

*Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer,*

*The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,*

*To grunt and sweat under a weary life,*

*But that the dread of something after death,*

*The undiscover'd country from whose bourn,*

*No traveller returns, puzzles the will,*

*And makes us rather bear those ills we have,*

*Than fly to others that we know not of?*

As Ben Johnson says, "Shakespeare is not for an age, but for all time", his spirituality is also for all time like that of Buddha, Jesus and Tagore. That kind of spirituality never asked man to found a religion upon it. The poetic beauty and artistic excellence of the songs of Shakespearean plays are, beyond doubt, the purest gems of Elizabethan lyricism where music and meaning are inseparable and simple words and phrases are charged with deep import.

*Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,*

*Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,*

*To the last syllable of recorded times,*

*And all our yesterdays have lighted fools,*

*The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle,*

*Life's but a walking shadow. . .*

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