

## An Analysis of Shakespeare's Four Great Tragedies in the Modern World

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### Abstract:

*William Shakespeare has become an important landmark in English literature. Shakespeare's modern influence is still seen clearly in many ways. For example, the success of Shakespeare's works helped to set the precedent for the evolution of modern dramas and plays. He is also credited with being one of the first writers to use any modern prose in his writings; in fact, the growth of the popularity of prose in Shakespeare's time is clearly shown as he used prose progressively more throughout his career. There can be no doubt that Shakespeare was a master of the artistry of the English language. He wrote with such fluidity of thought, word, rhythm, and sound that the work is presented in a complex manner, but is not unintelligible, even for the inexperienced reader. Often a single line would have several different meanings, each providing us with insight into a character or plot. There are countless situations like this in Shakespeare's plays, that can be put into the category of 'the human condition' - part of what it means to be human, something that never changes from century to century, or country to country, despite all the differences in knowledge, culture and emphasis. This is one good reason why Shakespeare's plays continue to be performed, not just in English-speaking countries, but also in translation throughout the world. Shakespeare's characters fall in love, and out of it, take a dislike to each other, betray each other, misunderstand each other, argue, fight and kill each other, are angry, sad, happy, jealous, envious, distrustful, untrustworthy, deceptive, magnanimous, forgiving - experiencing practically every human emotion you can think of, and every human situation. The*

*extraordinary writing skills with which Shakespeare created his accurate portrayals of human truth have not been rivalled or replicated since his death, nearly four hundred years ago. To simply "skim over" such an integral part of literary history would be to take the innards out of a living, breathing creature. A creature cannot survive incomplete, and literature cannot survive without William Shakespeare.*

**Key words:** modern influence, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth

There's no doubt that Shakespeare has an ample modern relevance. Many of his conceptions such as status, position and the conflict between good and evil, a clash between order and disorder and a strife between sin and retribution address human nature and environment, which are eternal or timeless. Though an absorbing opinion is that some of his recurring ideas such as ambition, loyalty, appearance, reality, guilt, and many more were amazingly contemporary for his time, they are still prevalent in our current society. However, the basic themes which we are still facing in today's world are the oppression of women, oppressive traditions, forbidden love and even homosexuality.

The importance of continuing to read *Macbeth* in our modern society is to educate readers on valuable lessons in life. The significance of gaining power appropriately, and the importance of justice are a few of the many life lessons that are relevant in Shakespeare's tragedy, *Macbeth*. The theme of "power corrupts" is connected in *Macbeth* as well as in modern society. Politicians from all walks of life and all narratives struggle with the same theme that Macbeth did. Nowadays corruption can be seen everywhere, which has not become so rampant and perpetuated overnight, but in the course of time. When we talk of corruption in public life, it covers corruption in politics, state governments, central governments, business, industry and so on. Public dealing counters in most government

offices are the places where corruption is most evident. If anybody does not pay for the work it is sure work won't be done. Certainly, we can see smaller examples of people whose ambition knows no boundaries and seek to appropriate more and more in accordance to their own subjectivity.

*Macbeth* is a great tragedy-themed play by William Shakespeare. Macbeth is ambitious, and his ambition reaches the height when the three witches tell him that he will be king. He kills King Duncan and murders and bloody events follow until the last scene of the play. There is continuously a chain of murders in the play, Shakespeare's piece of work showing how ambition overthrows morals. I think in today's world ambition still overthrows morals when people, for the sake of money, property, or land kill their own family members, friends or relatives.

In the play, when the three witches predict to Macbeth that he will acquire the title of the Cawdor, (which becomes true) and the witches then confront Macbeth, that he will one day become king and will murder King Duncan then, to fulfill these prophecies, he commits murder after murder and becomes the King. But later on, Lady Macbeth's conscience begins to torture her and she commits suicide; however Macduff kills Macbeth, and Malcolm is appointed King. In the play, Shakespeare conveys a moral message to his audience by expressing the consequences that will occur from bad choices made in life. Sometimes we find ourselves faced with difficult choices. We can be staring at two options and almost literally feel torn between which one to choose. We might know what the right choice is, but we might still have the desire to make the wrong one. This is conveyed to the audience by using a variety of different language techniques of Macbeth's actions. Macbeth is also relevant to a modern audience, as today's society has universal truths and beliefs such as, not to murder innocent people, and sometimes people go to such lengths to obtain power through ambition, that they would sacrifice their loyalty

and trust to betray others in some or the other way. In short, Shakespeare conveys a moral message to his audience by expressing the consequences that will occur from ruthless choices made in life. In the play, the Great Chain of being is disturbed when Macbeth becomes the King and all the peace and order in the country were lost. The fact that innocent people are being killed seems to be extremely distressing to the Elizabethan audience and by the end justice was served. As a result Macbeth and Lady Macbeth die after perpetual suffering, and a good King, Malcolm, is appointed, justice being restored. Furthermore, Shakespeare suggests that you should not be too ambitious since this will cause overpowering of the moral judgment.

William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* remains relevant in today's society. The play touches on themes such as suicide, revenge, the frailty of women, murder, fate, and destiny that are as prevalent today as they were in Shakespeare's time. It's a tragic story surrounded by a web of deceit and revenge. It is also an unparalleled story full of suspense, murder and intrigue. Hamlet provides some insight into modern society, as the play involves many issues which are still very relevant in today's world. Although Hamlet is by now over 400 years old, its interpretation of the human mind is timeless. Unfortunately, humanity's flaws haven't changed; although we can describe the 21st century as a "contemporary society" it hasn't changed significantly from the patriarchal and prejudiced society in which Shakespeare set his plays.

The main theme of Hamlet is alienation because his father is being killed by his uncle whom he trusted most, but now he feels alienated as he thinks that there is no one in the whole Denmark to be trustable. He is dreadfully depressed and his thoughts lead him to consider murders and suicide. The other theme of Hamlet is Humour because he thinks that he cannot make people understand what he really thinks, so he adopts the role of the humourist.

William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* is a classic revenge tragedy that is hard to forget. A king has his wife, crown and his life stolen from his younger brother. His young son Hamlet is the only one who properly mourns him, and who is ready to avenge his father's murder when the conspiracy is revealed to him. In the process of carrying out his revenge, Hamlet loses everything and everyone dear to him and ends up at the end. Plot is extremely important in *Hamlet*, but it is not the most interesting part of the play. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the hero is the representation of society and mankind, blinded by a lust for revenge which steers him down the path of evil. Inevitably, this path leads not only to his own death but the death of his family, the woman he loves, and ultimately the destruction of the throne of Denmark.

The themes of Shakespeare's plays still concern us: guilt, shame, anxiety, trauma, distress, mental illness, psychological vulnerability, jealousy, envy, inferiority, manipulation, psychosis, greed and murder - all are sadly present in the societies we watch every night on our news channels. People have grown an insatiable appetite for money and they can go to any extent to get what they desire. Undoubtedly they talk of morality and the importance of value-based life but that is for the outer show only. Their inner voice is something else. We even see it in Shakespeare's play *Othello* - the themes of *Othello* are still present in today's society: racism, facades, self-interest, military/war things, the nature of relationships (both physical/sexual/emotional and professional), murder, suicide, death etc. Betrayal is a key theme presented in *Othello*, and it is also still relevant to today's audiences. Racism is a significant addition presented in the play, which unfortunately still pervades contemporary society. Racism is treating someone differently (in a negative way) because of their colour, nationality, national or ethnic background. At an individual level, its effects can lead to depression, low self-esteem and poor achievement in studies. On a societal level it

can lead to devastating inequalities that disadvantage or marginalise a whole section of the community. Madness and jealousy drive the action as it thrives in the play; these destructive emotions are still alive in humanity today. The play portrays the typical scenes of love which always seem to draw in a timeless audience.

The entire plot of *Othello* is very much like the attitudes and methods of the modern society. Desdemona in the plot, plays the beautiful maiden who captures the eye of almost all she meets, yet ends up falling for the most unlikeliest of men. Desdemona in *Othello* is the first character that comes to our mind when we consider choice vs. fate in Shakespeare's plays. Desdemona has so many things working for her, and just as many things working against her that we think by the end of the play that her fate is sealed because of the choices she makes.

The characters of the play are similar to characters often portrayed daily, and in the media. A character such as Iago plays the typical villain who is present in all texts (films, plays etc.) of today's society. Iago is man driven by his own motives throughout the entire play, manipulating others to do things in his favour. Through Iago's actions, we can come to the conclusion that Shakespeare has only partly created a character of tragic villainous qualities with no redeeming features due to his honest virtues. The story of the downfall of a distressed man, not because of evil intent of others, but because of events random and of his own choice can be very compelling. The entire plot of *Othello* is very much like the attitudes and methods of the modern society. The plot tells of what happens when characters embark on a trail of jealousy and revenge, and how it can easily be taken a bit overboard. The behavior of people (and other organisms or even mechanisms) falls within a range with some behavior being common, some unusual, some acceptable, and some outside acceptable limits.

Last but not least, the play *King Lear* by William

Shakespeare is a brutal play filled with human cruelty and meaningless disasters. It has held its appeal for modern audiences as it explores the universal ideas and timeless themes of Power and Loyalty communicated through characterisation, language techniques and representations that parallel the context of the time in which they are produced. Lear is not only a father but a king when he gives away his authority to his unworthy daughters Goneril and Regan, he delivers not only himself and his family but all of Britain into chaos and cruelty, as the two wicked sisters indulge their appetite for power. Much havoc and arguing occurs, leaving Cordelia banished and Goneril and Regan in full control of the kingdom. The concept of power is present as Shakespeare examines the importance of relationships where a hierarchy is in order. After withdrawing himself as king, Lear's eldest two daughters Goneril and Regan strip him of his supremacy and force him to reduce the number of knights in his service, demonstrating his loss of authority as a King and a man.

The underlying theme of power is compatible throughout 'King Lear' and is also present in today's society. Goneril and Regan believe that by possessing Lear's kingdom they have power over everything, paralleling that of modern day society – materialism is power. Personal satisfaction and greed are the most important aspects of life of the society driven by materialism. Many people echo the sentiment that the real cause of the economic problems that has hit the world is the greed caused by materialism. The real problem may not be so simple but it could be one of the reasons. Here the greed is not only confined to acquisition of money but also power. Where there is power, corruption is bound to happen.

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