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Honors English 108 ~ Poetry Essay

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Shakespeare's Vivacious Virtuosity

“One would think that this work was the fruit of the imagination of a drunken savage,” says Voltaire (Eastman 5-6). Even the most scrutinous reader cringes at such harsh criticism of the widely celebrated play *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare. However, the callous critique does bring up an interesting question; what does Shakespeare's literature stand for, and just why do we enjoy his products so much? I believe that the overall works of William Shakespeare are well above drunken ravaging and are a rare glimpse into the mighty potential of the English language.

“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, or take arms against a sea of troubles [?]” Rather than keep company amongst those writers unwilling to make that extra leap for fame, Shakespeare takes a stab at the top. While other poets and authors were stuck in the realms of imagination, William took the chance and asked the real life questions. In the above passage from Act III Scene I of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's tragic protagonist asks the absolute question, whether fighting a losing battle against innumerable odds is really worth the effort, or should you just quit; die. With teen suicide rates on the rise again and depression seeming to striking nearly everyone, who has not pondered this exact same inquiry in their own lives?

While Shakespearean plays are a hot topic, we cannot afford to overlook his arrangement of masterfully written poems and sonnets. “They [poems, sonnets] vary from the most trivial of occasional verses to poems in which a whole range of important emotions is involved”

(Hammond 2). Rarely acknowledged by the average reader, William Shakespeare actually wrote well over 150 Sonnets and at least 5 Poems. While the collection of Sonnets is very incoherent, only the pessimist gazes upon the compilation as whole, whereas the ardent observer chooses to look at the magnificent quality of the individual piece. According to the *Essential Shakespeare Handbook* many Elizabethan Era writers were not deemed as prestigious or even talented until they had wet their feet in the ‘noble’ art of poetry (Riding 447-451). Such was true even for Shakespeare, when plagues haunted London in the late 1590’s he was forced to go underground to ferment his creative genius. Lacking the nobility and patronage of many other writers of his time, he needed to write lucrative poetry fast. His first poem was an immediate success; “Venus and Adonis” made him a star even in his own lifetime.

*Now quick desire hath caught the yielding prey,
And glutton-like she feeds, yet never filleth,
Her lips are conquerors, his lips obey,
Paying what ransom the insulter willeth;
Whose vulture thought doth pitch the price so high
That she will draw his lips’ rich treasure dry. (Riding 450)*

Embellishing the undying beauty of Ovid’s “Metamorphoses” but portraying the more human-like realities of desire and disappointment; this quote from Shakespeare’s poem is one of the piece’s best. According to *Essential Shakespeare Handbook* William Shakespeare viewed “Venus and Adonis” as his first truly literary work; elaborate language, precise formal features, and carefully-balanced structure are but a few of the things that lead him to gain renowned prestige from this poem (Riding, 450). While I agree that the structure, and aspects of that nature, is well written, what I really think makes this poem great is the imagery and metaphors

conspicuously present. This poem, written in 6-line stanza form, speaks new wonders to each individual who is lucky enough to have been exposed to such literary brilliance like this.

“Like a god, Shakespeare exhausted worlds, and then imagin’d new [ones]” (Eastman 8). Extraordinary writer himself, Samuel Johnson aptly puts into words the magic performed by Shakespeare. From the imaginative universe created in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to the contrast of light and dark themes in the romantic *Romeo and Juliet* William Shakespeare’s literary brilliance has stood the test of time. You may be infatuated with your favorite story now, but will your feeble figment of fiction still be read and discussed endlessly four hundred years from now?

While many wish to undermine the artistic luminosity presented in Shakespearean by proposing pitiful challenges about authorship, I think that the issue has no relevance. Regardless of the true circumstances; one man created these marvels of the English language for us to devour and digest. Accepting the writer’s identity as a mystery is the first step towards fully appreciating the poems, sonnets, and plays that defines our civilization’s culture.

When I think of Shakespearean literature I think of unprecedented and unsurpassed excellence in showing the true flexibility of the English language. Every smooth, sweet stanza scrumptiously satiates you each time you read one of his pieces. Most anything in entertainment takes tips from Shakespeare, numerous Hollywood recreations of plays and poems have been very popular. Finally, if a high school freshman in the middle of Suburbia, Illinois can find enough interest in Shakespeare to keep him thirsting for more, then William Shakespeare of Stratford-Upon-Avon is definitely worth further investigation by *anyone*.

“His Works may be considered a Map of Life.” ~Samuel Johnson