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# Shakespeare's Timeless Impact: Navigating Loss and Anxiety in Contemporary Society

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## Abstract

*This study looks at how Shakespeare used modern society to assist people deal with profound grief, ambiguity, and fear. This was achieved through producing a corpus of work for future generations as well as by providing a venue for plays and other works in the present. As a result, humanity was able to cope with fear and hopelessness and overcome obstacles in life. This effect eventually extended throughout the world. In examining Shakespeare's works, the research highlights the importance of these works for professionals who operate in environments characterised by pain and hopelessness.*

**Keywords: Humanity, Loss, Uncertainty**

## Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss ideas and opinions regarding William Shakespeare and his insightful poetry. It is difficult to completely investigate Shakespeare's works here due to space constraints and their immensity. Still, there are things about Shakespeare that readers may find interesting, particularly those who are interested in people and groups from a psychoanalytic standpoint. These concepts might not be revolutionary, but they aim to raise others' consciousness in proportion to my own growing comprehension.

It is important to be aware of several methods when studying Shakespeare, including literary, historical, psychoanalytical, group-analytical, artistic, religious, theatrical, cultural, linguistic, and philosophical discourses. Whether formally or informally, practically everyone in the West is familiar with Shakespeare's works. Famous quotes like "If music be the food of love, play on" from Twelfth Night or "To be or not to be: that is the question" from Hamlet are two examples of works that people are familiar with. Though they were affected by Shakespeare, it's important to remember that other nations have their own literary icons, such as Goethe for the Germans, Pushkin for the Russians, and Voltaire for the French. English has an edge because of its large vocabulary and capacity to describe the nuances of human experience. German, for instance, contains roughly 200,000 words, but English has about a million words. Shakespeare has an advantage over poets from countries with more stringent language regulations because English is still expanding and absorbing vocabulary from other languages.

## History

He was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, 93 miles north of London, to yeoman parents who owned a small farm in the Forest of Arden. Raised in both rural and town settings, this environment greatly influenced his poetry. The Forest of Arden and the market town Stratford were integral to his upbringing, with a population of about a thousand people. The town housed the medieval church Holy Trinity, which still stands today. Despite his early life being relatively obscure, historical records indicate the impact of the plague in 1564, claiming the lives of 200 people, including some from his own neighborhood on Henley Street. William, the third of eight children, lost two sisters shortly after birth. His life remains a mystery until 1582 when he got married.

Little is directly known about William's personal religious experiences. However, it is evident that religious doctrine played a significant role in his life, considering his baptism, marriage, and burial took place in Holy Trinity Church. In terms of education, he likely attended the local Grammar school, where he would have received a strong education in grammar, logic, rhetoric, and Latin, studying classical texts and religious material. While opinions about his early life must be subjective, it can be inferred that he was born into a relatively well-off family, albeit not nobility. His birth, following the deaths of his two sisters, might have made him a precious child, potentially leading to excessive concern and protection from his parents, especially his mother. His upbringing occurred in a vibrant English town, surrounded by nature and diverse people, providing a fertile ground for his intellectual and experiential growth.

In 1582, he became acquainted with Anne Hathaway, who resided approximately a mile west from his home, across farm fields and footpaths. After an intimate relationship with the farmer's eldest daughter, they wed in November 1582 when it became apparent she was expecting. Anne, eight years older than William, was 26 at the time of their marriage, an age considered unusually old to remain unmarried during that era. Their first child, Susanna, was baptized on May 26, 1583, and later, on February 2, 1585, twins Hamnet and Judith were christened. William briefly departed for London soon after, but

he did return periodically over the years. Between 1582 and 1592, there are few historical records about Shakespeare, leading to this period being dubbed the "Lost Years." Before 1592, he likely observed plays in Stratford and Coventry. At 28, his play "Henry VI Part I" was staged at the Rose Theatre in London. This era, marked by popular plays, traveling actors, and religious events, significantly influenced Shakespeare. The political and religious turmoil of the time, including Henry VIII's reign and Elizabeth I's rule, deeply impacted society. The Reformation reshaped England, closing monasteries and altering religious practices. The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 marked a pivotal victory for Elizabeth, shaping the emergence of the British Empire. Elizabeth's death in 1603 ushered in James I's reign in England.

James, a reclusive monarch, supported the arts and the Jacobean court frequently hosted Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare was part of the Chamberlains Men, later the Kings Men, a touring acting group. He gained fame in the 1590s, becoming prosperous and owning property in London and Stratford. Despite his brief life, he was incredibly creative, delving into themes of love and loss, evident in his 154 sonnets. While his works are often categorized into Comedies, Histories, Tragedies, and Sonnets, his tragedies like *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* stand out.

## Interpretations and Applications of the Works

A.C. Bradley, the Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, authored the influential book "Shakespearean Tragedy" in 1904, which has become a classic in literary studies. Bradley's thesis focuses on Shakespearean tragedies, emphasizing the downfall of a renowned "hero" due to a fatal flaw or vulnerability. He observes a shift in conflict portrayal, moving from external conflicts between characters or groups in early works like *Richard II* and *III* to internal conflicts within the hero, as seen in *Hamlet* and *Othello*. Bradley highlights the hero's contribution to their own downfall, emphasizing human vulnerability. Interestingly, despite being contemporaries with Freud, Bradley does not reference Freud's psychoanalytic work in his analysis of human character and conflict.

The book “Psychoanalytic Ideas and Shakespeare,” edited by I. Wise and M. Mills, explores the connection between Shakespeare’s works and psychoanalytic theory. Mills describes the analysis process akin to presenting a personal play or novel. McDougal’s concept of the inner conflicting selves aligns with Shakespeare’s idea that life is a stage and people are actors playing various roles. The book delves into the hidden meanings of Shakespeare’s plays, particularly the tragedies, shedding light on our unconscious minds. It also discusses how Shakespeare emerged as a genius during a transformative period in history, filling a need for entertainment and introspective exploration amid societal changes.

The essence of my thesis is that as humans, we inherently crave social connection and the sharing of experiences, although sometimes this inclination is rejected. It’s widely understood that the presence of others is crucial for the physical and psychological well-being of infants. Growing up amidst a community significantly shapes one’s personality. Our lives are profoundly influenced by experiences, especially our ability to process them through reflection and imagination. Shakespeare’s audience, living in an era marked by plagues, public executions, and other uncertainties, found solace in his plays. The Shakespearean works allowed people to engage with, contemplate, and express deeply personal and relevant aspects of their lives. These performances attracted up to 3000 individuals at a time, representing diverse sections of society, emphasizing their popularity and significance.

Currently, formal theatre coexists with various distractions like movies, TV, sports, and digital experiences. Although these distractions are often impersonal and narrow, they don’t effectively address personal conflicts. Analytic psychotherapies emerge as essential therapeutic tools in society. Notably, Shakespeare’s works have historically provided a form of psychotherapy, and, along with other literary contributions, they continue to be profoundly valuable for humanity. Certainly, the dramatic arts offer more than mere entertainment and distraction. They encapsulate a Bionian sense of containment, allowing us to identify with characters based on our unique life experiences. While other

visual media can provide containment, the tangible presence of live theatre, with its sensory aspects like actors’ breathing and subtle smells, creates a profound immediacy. In Shakespeare’s era, marked by pervasive anxiety and uncertainties such as death, disease, and war, theatre served as a powerful outlet. The anxieties of succession and the looming threat of Spanish invasion during Elizabeth’s reign found expression in Shakespeare’s historical dramas like Henry VI, Richard II, Henry V, Henry IV, and Richard III, addressing themes of monarchs being deposed and succession challenges.

The concerns of the present era were reflected in the distant past. In 1599, during a period of English forces sent to Ireland to suppress rebellion led by the charismatic Earl of Essex, Shakespeare wrote and performed Henry V. Despite England’s failure in Ireland, the play captured the public’s fear of depleted forces and the looming threat of defeat, yet it ultimately conveyed a message of triumph. Shapiro convincingly argues that the events of 1599 significantly influenced the creation of several major Shakespearean works.

Some plays utilize comedy to cope with life’s struggles, often mocking characters like Malvolio in “Twelfth Night” or Falstaff in Royal history plays. Themes of justice and characters facing consequences are common, creating a richly poetic, English-speaking world that provides a vicarious experience and a sense of containment for the audience. People exploring European medieval art galleries often notice the strong focus on Christian religious themes. However, Shakespeare’s works, particularly for the English audience, introduced a more secular genre. This shift was embraced by artists like William Blake and other writers. Most importantly, Shakespeare provided the general public with a fresh source of experience, enriching their imagination.

Many regard Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, as Shakespeare’s greatest tragedy and perhaps the finest play in history. Written around 1601, Shakespeare added original elements to the story, defining the Renaissance style and poetic essence of the play. The plot revolves around familial murder, adultery, incest, suicide, and madness. Hamlet, the young Prince of Denmark, learns of his father

King Hamlet's death, allegedly from a snake bite. Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, marries Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, and assumes the throne within a month. The ghost of the late King reveals to Hamlet the truth: Claudius poisoned his brother and seduced Gertrude. The ghost urges Hamlet to seek revenge by killing Claudius while sparing his mother. Hamlet decides to feign madness to achieve his goal. The story also intertwines Hamlet's love for Ophelia, who tragically succumbs to madness and suicide, deepening Hamlet's despair.

In 1851, John Everett Millais, a renowned member of the "Pre-Raphaelites," created a magnificent and iconic artwork featuring Ophelia, now housed in the Tate Britain Gallery in London.

The central psychological dilemma in the play revolves around Hamlet's conflicted desire to kill King Claudius, a task he is destined to do. However, he struggles with this urge, leading to a series of tragic events. Ultimately, he does kill the King, but not before his mother dies from poison, and he meets his own demise. Freud extensively discussed Hamlet in his work "The Interpretation of Dreams", comparing it to Sophocles' Oedipus Rex. Freud noted that Hamlet's theme mirrors Oedipus Rex but is presented in a more repressed manner. In Oedipus Rex, the actions are straightforward, whereas in Hamlet, the repression lies in the fact that it is not Hamlet but his uncle who commits the patricide and marries his mother. Hamlet, burdened by unconscious guilt, struggles with revenge, as his loathing is replaced by self-reproaches and moral qualms.

Certain scholars argue that the Greek Orestes myth, rather than Sophocles' Oedipus myth, accurately reflects the themes in Hamlet. In Homer's version, Orestes, son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, seeks revenge after his mother kills his father and marries her lover. Orestes' story has become a model for crimes committed under mitigating circumstances. Shakespeare's works, including Hamlet, offer a more abstract representation of the unconscious, distinct from Greek myths.

Stephen Greenblatt, a Harvard University Humanities Professor, along with others, asserts that Hamlet marks a pivotal moment in Shakespeare's career. Greenblatt, from a literary perspective, and

Hildebrand, from a psychoanalytic background, link the play's development to the death of Shakespeare's son, Hamnet, in 1596. Notably, they draw connections between the names "Hamlet" and "Hamnet." Greenblatt also highlights that while writing Hamlet, Shakespeare introduced over 600 new words, many of which were not only novel to his plays but also to the English language, such as "fanged," "besmirched," "pander," and "unnerved."

Harold Bloom, Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University, boldly asserts in his 1999 work that Shakespeare "invented the human." This claim might sound surprising at first, but Bloom dedicates nearly 800 pages to unpacking this argument, exploring Shakespeare's characters and their development. Despite his differences with Freud, Bloom showcases a deep appreciation for the portrayal of characters and the human experience in literature. According to Bloom, Shakespeare's characters evolve or individuate within a play through self-reflection, relationships, and introspection. Major characters like Falstaff, Hamlet, Iago, Lear, and Macbeth exemplify how character, consciousness, and meaning are intricately woven into Shakespeare's works.

Bloom's claim that Shakespeare pioneered the evocation of human creativity in literature might initially sound implausible, but upon deeper scrutiny, it appears to hold substantial merit. He suggests that this creativity established standards and significantly influenced the evolution of Western literature, shaping our understanding of humanity. Bloom points to Dr. Samuel Johnson in the 1700s as the first critic to assert that Shakespeare was the trailblazer in depicting human transformation through willpower rather than, for instance, through illness or decay.

Jacobs quotes Ernst Kris, stating that art engages both our id and ego. The id finds expression through the dramatic elements of a play, like passion, murder, and envy, while the literary form, particularly its poetic nature, offers a more pleasing outlet for our id. The auditory and sensory pleasure derived from works of art can be seen as an appeal to the ego and superego demands. Rhythm and rhyme play a crucial role in poetry and drama, with certain rules traditionally considered essential in various forms, rhythm is produced differently in different languages.

In English, rhythm is often expressed through the pattern of unstressed and stressed syllables. An iambic pentameter, for example, consists of five successive pairs of unstressed and stressed syllables: da dum, da dum, da dum, da dum, da dum. Such patterns are common in English poetry and were notably prevalent in Shakespeare's works. Variations can occur, allowing a stressed syllable to precede an unstressed one, as seen in the line: "To BE/or NOT/ to BE/THAT is/the QUES-tion." Through these techniques and others, auditory beauty is intricately woven into much of the works, creating a pleasing effect for the ear.

Frank Kermode holds prestigious positions as a professor in three different universities: he is the Professor of Modern English at University College London, the Professor of English Literature at Cambridge, and the Professor of Poetry at Harvard. Like Harold Bloom and other scholars, Kermode has analyzed the unique writing style in Shakespeare's Hamlet. He asserts that Hamlet is an unparalleled character in literary history, stating, "To take him as the herald of a new age is neither idolatrous nor hyperbolic" (Kermode, 125). Kermode, echoing Bloom, suggests that Hamlet signifies the beginning of a new era for humanity. In his book "Shakespeare's Language", Kermode explores how Hamlet is marked by a specific literary technique, the use of doubles.

He discusses a grammatical term called "hendiadys," which refers to expressing one idea through two words, like "house and home" (from Henry IV, Part II). Another instance of doubling is the "play within the play" in Hamlet, featuring characters like Cornelius and Voltermand, as well as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, serving as doubles without apparent purpose. Kermode argues that these literary devices, including doubling, add mystery and tension to the play. Additionally, (Wooster and Buckroyd) reference Albert Rothenberg's intricate work from 1979, exploring the nature and origin of the creative process.

Kermode argues that techniques like doubling in literature create mystery and tension, while (Wooster and Buckroyd) delve into Albert Rothenberg's valuable work from 1979, interpreting the psychological aspects of doubling in Shakespeare's

writings. This analysis includes concepts like janusian thinking (one becomes two) and homospatial thinking (two become one), stimulating creative imagination. Rothenberg suggests that creativity involves breaking down a task into separate parts and then reintegrating them into a unified whole. According to Hildebrand, citing Kott, Shakespeare's plays act as mirrors, reflecting, magnifying, and parodying situations, creatively exploring themes in diverse contexts for deeper meaning. For a comprehensive understanding, readers are encouraged to refer to the original works.

Shakespeare's enduring popularity stems not only from his exquisite writing but also from his deep exploration of the human experience, encompassing both tragedy and moments of sweetness. His works resonate with the essence of humanity, showcasing profound insights into the human condition. Through conscious and unconscious elements, Shakespeare's writings tap into the depths of the human psyche, allowing exploration of repressed themes, as seen in the example of Hamlet. The partial lifting of repression in art appeals to audiences, providing a liberating experience without the need for complete understanding. This release from unconscious repression is a crucial aspect of the allure of artistic processes. Freud and Derrida highlighted the ways in which the unconscious finds expression, emphasizing the pleasure derived from the exploration of repressed thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the literary experience offers a path toward integration, harmonizing the unconscious with the conscious, blending the past into the present, and looking toward the future.

Freud, in his early works, highlighted sublimation as a defense mechanism, allowing the expression of sexual and aggressive instincts through socially acceptable channels. He also explored how dreams symbolically expressed unconscious conflicts, emphasizing the symbolic nature of words. Klein's early work underscored the significance of play in revealing a child's concerns symbolically, offering relief from real experiences, such as interactions with parents.

Freeman-Sharpe applied psychoanalytical thinking to analyze plays like King Lear and The Tempest, attempting to uncover aspects of



Shakespeare's personal development through the characters. While her approach demonstrated the meticulous application of psychoanalytical skills, it suffered from the overzealous promises of psychoanalysis prevalent at that time. Contemporary perspectives have led to a more measured assessment of what psychoanalysis can reveal. Freeman Sharpe's claim that characters directly mirror Shakespeare's psyche or projections remains untestable but could be indirectly explored through clinical inference. However, making wholesale claims about such connections requires caution and careful consideration.

Winnicott described the theoretical understanding of individuals in health having an inner world and an outer world, emphasizing the importance of an intermediate area of experiencing. This intermediate space, known as potential space, includes illusion, omnipotence, and play. In later development, arts, religion, and culture occupy this space, allowing individuals to engage with creative experiences. When observing art, such as a painting in a gallery, individuals can fantasize, wonder, and dream, reclaiming themselves after the experience. Winnicott highlighted that creative play occurs in the overlap of potential spaces between individuals, connecting his ideas with the relevance of Shakespeare's works to everyone.

The concept of the "Social Unconscious," developed by scholars like Hopper, Dalal, and Brown, holds value. It helps understand how Shakespeare's works tapped into the contemporary social unconscious of their times. This historical account serves as a reservoir of both unconscious and conscious anxieties harbored by society, reflecting shared mental representations of traumatic historical events and celebrated achievements, as seen in works like Henry V.

### Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, this paper illuminates the profound impact of Shakespeare's timeless works in aiding humanity to navigate the tumultuous seas of loss, uncertainty, and anxiety. Through a meticulous exploration of his plays and literary legacy, we unveil the ingenious manner in which Shakespeare utilized the canvas of contemporary society to

provide solace and meaning to individuals grappling with life's most profound challenges. By creating a platform transcending time, he bestowed upon the present and future generations a reservoir of wisdom and empathy. This enduring influence, stretching across continents and cultures, has become a beacon of hope for countless souls facing despair.

Shakespeare's ability to capture the complexities of human emotions resonates even today, offering solace to professionals immersed in spaces marked by suffering and despondency. His works serve as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit, reminding us of our shared struggles and the power of art to heal. As we delve into the interpretations and applications of his creations, we recognize the transformative potential they hold, enabling individuals to confront their anxieties and find strength in the face of adversity. In a world marred by uncertainties, Shakespeare's legacy stands as a testament to the enduring capacity of literature to illuminate the darkest corners of the human experience, guiding us toward hope, perseverance, and the unwavering belief in our ability to overcome life's challenges.

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