

THE BARD AND HIS IMPLICIT AGENDA: SIGNIFICANCE OF SHAKESPEARE IN VALUE EDUCATION AND APPLIED ETHICS

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Abstract

Value education is a process in which people are assisted by others, who may be older, in a position of authority or are more experienced, to make explicit those values underlying their own behavior for their own and others' long term well being and to reflect on and acquire other values and behavior which they recognize as being more effective for long term well being of self and others. The two main approaches to value education is 1) a societal, religious or cultural approach 2) a type of Socratic dialogue where people are brought to their own realization of what is ethical behavior. Shakespearean plays are a kind of Socratic dialogue that gives young people an initiation into values, giving knowledge of the rules needed to function in society, grasp certain underlying principles and applying these rules intelligently in given situations. He doesn't 'instruct' but serves as an entertaining and exciting text of the otherwise satiating process of value education. This paper examines the role of Shakespeare in making us refiner species and bringing discipline to humanity by making us thoughtful spectators of life. It explores the various areas of study within ethics, namely normative ethics, virtue ethics, stoicism, hedonism, Epicureanism, deontology, role ethics, anarchist ethics, mohist consequentialism, teleology and ecocentric ethics and further investigates the specific plays, plots and characters in Shakespeare which relates to and holds a mirror to these ethics.

Keywords: Value education, Ethics, Mirror, Socratic dialogue, Discipline.

Value education is defined as a process in which people are assisted by others, who may be older, in a position of authority or are more experienced, to make explicit those values underlying their own behavior for their own and others' long term well being and to reflect on and acquire other values and behavior which they recognize as being more effective for long term well being of self and others. The two main approaches to value education is 1) a societal, religious or cultural approach which transmits a set of values 2) a type of Socratic dialogue where people are brought to their own realization of what is ethical behavior and what is good for themselves and the society.

Shakespearean works are a kind of Socratic dialogue that gives young people an initiation into values, giving knowledge of the rules needed to function in society, grasp certain

underlying principles and applying these rules intelligently in given situations. It can be personal values, moral values, spiritual values, and social and citizenship values. “Themes that value education addresses to varying degrees are character, moral development, religious education, spiritual development, citizenship education, personal development, social development and cultural development”(Taylor 107). All these are themes discussed in the plays of Shakespeare where he teaches us about love, honor, duty, filial piety, determination, patience, forgiveness etc. His plays present the audience with lessons on ambition, duty, greed, jealousy and sin. These are things that all of us come across in our lives, and these are things that make us human. What more can a value education text teach us through theoretical preaching than a Macbeth, Othello, Prospero or Mark Anthony in flesh and blood give the audience lessons on ethical living. Shakespeare texts are a great way to begin moral discussions with students. The ethical lessons embedded in the plots and characters of Shakespeare rings a bell in the mind of the audience without the clichés of moral preaching. Shakespeare’s texts are at par with *The Aesop Fables* and *The Panchatantra Tales* which provide learning experiences to the reader and act as a touchstone for applied ethics in life without tiresome theoretical reasoning.

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that involves systematizing, defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong conduct. Ethics investigates the questions “what is good and what is bad?” and “what actions are right or wrong in particular circumstances?” Ethics seek to resolve questions of human morality, by defining such concepts such as good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice, justice and crime. It is defined as “a set of concepts and principles that guide us in determining what behavior helps or harms sentient creatures” (Paul 7). The term ethics is used interchangeably with ‘morality’ and ‘value education’. It is an inbuilt human capacity. Shakespeare’s art is essentially ethical and empirical. It takes realities into account and is not based on the abstract. He humanizes his characters and gives them a sort of heart. He lends them his affection. It is seen that he always tries to convert a necessary evil into good. “Every single character in Shakespeare, is as much an individual as those in life itself” (Hazlitt viii) and it is Shakespearean art that brought those characters to life. Shakespeare’s characters hold a mirror up to nature- what is acceptable and what is vicious and crude. He stimulates the readers’ or audiences’ imagination and makes them appreciate the characters by leading their imagination to participate in the scene as if in their real life. Shakespeare’s characters are not fixed and he unveils his characters in the manner they view and react to one another. He not only depicts the mere habitual outward behavior but also the transitory inward impressions of characters, their different reflections and unending combinations. He represents the characters’ inner life, thereby illuminating common human nature. Just like a bitter medicine is encapsulated in a sugar coated tablet, Shakespearean plays are capsules on ethics in the disguise of thought provoking and emotionally sweeping literature.

One of the main criticisms on Shakespeare was that his writing was not moral. Writers like Coleridge have frequently emphasized the immorality of characters like Falstaff. Hazlitt says, "...*Hamlet* for example...should not be judged by ordinary moral rules. The ethical delineations of Shakespeare do not exhibit the drab colored Quakerism of morality" (109). In *Measure for Measure*, he remarks that Shakespeare's morality is to be judged as that of nature itself. He taught what he had learned from her. He showed the greatest knowledge of humanity with the greatest fellow feeling for it (323).

Ethics refers to philosophical ethics and moral philosophy and Shakespearean characters urge us to use reason in order to answer various kinds of ethical questions that arise in our mind as readers or audience. The characters are reflective of general human behavior and persuade the reader to inquire into questions like "Is this how one should live? Is it the right decision? Is it justified?" It leads us to think critically about moral values and direct our actions in terms of values. Shakespeare raises in our minds specific practical questions. When we judge something or someone as right or wrong, it can either be true or false. The answer depends on an individual human perspective, but the climax of the plays render the response for the ethical questions that rose in our mind. Tragedy befalls the villain, goodness is rewarded and crime is punished. Thus the baffling moral decisions are resolved. Read through the lens of ethics, the works of Shakespeare strategically explore the various areas of study within ethics, namely normative ethics, virtue ethics, stoicism, hedonism, Epicureanism, deontology, role ethics, anarchist ethics, mohist consequentialism, teleology and ecocentric ethics. Further investigation of specific plays, plots, scenes and characters in Shakespeare reveal how they supplement and hold a mirror to these varied branches of ethics and provide an insight on how value education can be clubbed with a study of his works.

Normative ethics

Normative ethics is the study of ethical action, a branch of ethics which investigates how one ought to act, morally speaking. It studies what makes actions right or wrong or which character traits are good or bad. It identifies virtue as a disposition of character that leads to good behavior; the various manifestations being wisdom, courage, reason, determination, modesty, generosity, self control etc. Virtue leads to happiness and vice to misery. This is clearly what Shakespeare intends to communicate through the doctor's speech about Lady Macbeth's troubles: "...unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles" (*Macbeth*, Act 5, Sc 1). Virtue beget happiness and vice beget wretchedness.

Shakespeare believed that the power to correct our feelings and acquire virtue lies within each one of us. *Hamlet* is the author's mouthpiece when he tries to breathe some sense into his mother and tries to awake her conscience:

*...let me ring your heart; for so I shall
If it be made of penetrable stuff,
If damned custom have not brass'd it so*

That it is proof and bulwark against sense. (Hamlet, Act 3, Sc 4)

Each character in Shakespeare illumines some facet of his central theme-man's moral nature. Be it Juliet's determination, Macbeth's ambition, Prospero's generosity, Hamlet's indecisiveness, Iago's jealousy, Lear's false pride, Romeo's love, Shylock's greed, Portia's intelligence, Ariel's loyalty, Imogen's resolution, Lady Macbeth's lust for power- each trait is a normative study of how right actions provide right output and wrong actions lead to ruin. Regarding citizenship values, Shakespeare's works advocates the positive aspects of supporting and maintaining a stable government (e.g. of Scotland in *Macbeth*). The dangers of mob rule and anarchy are visible through the portrayal of Rome in *Julius Ceaser* and the harm that comes out of maintaining foolish feuds are dealt with in *Romeo and Juliet*.

Shakespeare treats courage as a virtue which is in advancing towards the dangerous and bearing up under unavoidable evils. This is suggested from the lines in *Timon of Athens*: "to revenge is no valour, but to bear" (Act 3, Sc 5). Shakespeare represents Coriolanus as truly courageous when he says:

*So now the gates are ope: now prove good seconds
'Tis for the followers Fortune widens theme,
Not for the fliers: mark me and do the like.* (Coriolanus, Act 1, Sc4)

In Othello, jealousy, prejudice and poor judgement sparks the tragic downfall of the hero. Jealousy can take away the judgement of reason, as Iago says about Othello:

*...yet that I put the moor
At least into a jealousy so strong
That judgement cannot cure....* (Act 2, Sc1)

Shakespeare believed that man's chief goodwill involves the use of reason. Without reason, a man would be divorced from himself and can be equated with a beast.

*...what is a man
If his chief good and market of his time
Be but to sleep and feed? A beast no more.
Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,
Looking before and after, gave us not
That capability and god like reason
To rust in us unused....* (Hamlet, Act 4, Sc 4)

Shakespeare says that reason should rule the emotions and it is a difficult task to wrestle with the emotions and conquer them: "...yet our power / Shall do a court'sy to our wrath, which men / May blame, but not control" (King Lear, Act 3, Sc 7). Reason should rule over passions. When it is the other way round, one suffers a kind of insurrection and becomes enslaved to his own feelings. It is Lear's violent impetuosity, his blindness to everything but the dictates of his passion or affection that leads to all his misfortunes. Reason must moderate passion before it can direct us, is the message to the reader from the author who wrote:

I say again, there is no English soul

*More stronger to direct you than yourself
If with the sap of reason you would quench,
Or but allay the fire of passion.* (King Henry VIII, Act 1, Sc1)

In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare discusses about the greater difficulty of doing what is good than knowing what is good.

Portia: Good sentences and well pronounced.

Nerissa: They would be better if well followed. (Act1, Sc2)

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare portrays a hero with great refinement of thought and sentiment, but is incapable of action. It is believed that the character of Hamlet enabled Freud to develop part of his theory of human nature. In the words of Coleridge: “Shakespeare wished to impress upon us the truth that action is the chief end of existence, no faculties of intellect, however brilliant, can be considered valuable, or as misfortunes, if they withdraw us from or render us repugnant to action, and lead us to think and think of doing, until the time has elapsed when we can do anything effectually” (Coleridge 458). Hamlet’s flaw provides the reader with a moral lesson.

According to the Shakespearean norm, love is an ardent, tender, moral and mirthful passion. The beauty and insight of Shakespeare’s finest portrayal of the tragedy of love is seen in *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare depicts how love has led to the development of Juliet from a wide eyed girl into a self assured, loyal, capable and confident woman. ‘Love’ in this play is a synonym for self development and self sacrifice. Romeo’s love is of such passion and purity that he kills himself when he believes that the object of his love, Juliet has died. His love matures over the course of the play, from the shallow desire to be in love to a profound and intense passion. The character development of the two happens due to the influence and inspiration of the other. Both go to the extreme because of their intense emotions. The scene in which Juliet stabs herself through the heart becomes a symbol for defying feminine weakness and shows the power of true love.

The ethical content of *Macbeth* is in the moral lesson it discloses-the birth and development of evil is in the human heart and the wages of sin is death. It is a profound and philosophical story of the effect of sin upon human life and the resulting plunge into the abyss of ruin. The deadly consequences of evil are shown in its fearful reality. The author portrays how, falling prey to the shadowy clutches of temptation is weaved into the fabric of human psyche. The reader shrinks with horror from the scenes of violence and human woe and is subjected to a painful strain and purging of emotions. The real punishment for Macbeth is not meted out to him by the hand of man, but is a deterioration that he can never struggle against. He suffers the pangs of moral degradation and conscience which are thousand fold worse than death. The sleep walking scene reveals the remorse that strains Lady Macbeth’s soul even though she tries to conceal her emotions. Her strength of will and masculine firmness are shattered by her guilt and resultant wretchedness. Lust for power becomes a

fiendish driving force which hails a man from the grandest position to spiritual agony and eventually to brutal death.

Shakespeare made sure that his characters bore the consequences of their actions- mistakes were always forgiven and sins, always punished.

Stoicism

Stoic means being content and being serene. Self mastery of one's emotion leads to spiritual peace. Every person should develop an individual will which has to be independent and inviolate. Allowing another person to disturb the mental equilibrium is like offering oneself in slavery. It also advocates freedom from material attachments. Stoicism means to accept that cannot be changed and enduring everything in a rational fashion. Stoicism sees even death as a returning to god and so something which need not be feared. It propagates the concept that, problems in life should not be avoided but embraced and remaining abstinent in the face of temptation is a victory to man.

In *Julius Caesar*, duty, honor and a stoic indifference to personal fate are seen as the redeeming features of life. A number of the characters in this play commit suicide because as Casca says: "So every bond man in his own hand bears/ The power to cancel his captivity" (Act 1, Sc 3). They embrace death to the humiliation they would have to bear if captured. Caesar's words are the epic example of stoicism in Shakespeare.

*Cowards die many times before their deaths,
The valiant never taste of death but once.
Of all the wonders that I have yet heard,
It seems to me more strange that men should fear;
Seeing that death, a necessary end,
Will come when it come. (Act 2, Sc2)*

Be it Brutus, Cassius, Caesar or Messala, throughout *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare demonstrates his cynical attitude towards all humanity regardless of how noble and novel it seems to the whole world.

Hedonism

This philosophy advocates maximizing pleasure and minimizing pain. It deals with a kind of self gratification regardless of the pain and expense to others. "Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die" is the motto of hedonism. There is little concern about the future. It encourages the pursuit of enjoyment and indulgence, without hesitation and believes pleasure to be the final end. *The Twelfth Night* is the most hedonistic of Shakespeare's plays as it urges us to make the most of every precious moment. In the Elizabethan period, 'twelfth night' was a festival celebrated with music, masked balls, misrule and general revelry. The same is represented in the play by that name. There is a dramatisation of the contrast between the hedonistic Sir Toby Belch and Malvolio who is a representative of the puritan faction keen on

banning recreational activities and festivals. The antagonism between these characters is represented in Sir Toby's retort:

Art any more than a steward?

Dost thou think because thou art virtuous

There shall be no more cakes and ale? (Act 2, Sc3)

Another hedonistic character in Shakespeare is Falstaff, who eats, drinks, steals, trash talks and celebrates his way through life. He is the embodiment of the inversion of social order and rebellion for personal pleasure. His indulgence of unruly behavior and hedonistic character cuts him loose from normality.

Epicureanism

A combination of virtue ethics and hedonism is called epicureanism. Epicureans believe that some pleasures and indulgences are detrimental to human beings and can result in negative consequences. So one should exercise caution and moderation because excessive indulgence even in virtue can lead to pain. If courage is closer to the extreme, it becomes foolish. Love in excess also ends in pain and suffering. Excess ambition is what causes Macbeth's doom and blind trust kills Othello and Duncan. The epicurean philosophy is summarized in Lucetta's words to Julia in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*:

I do not seek to quench your love's hot fire,

But qualify the fire's extreme rage,

Lest it should burn above the bounds of reason. (Act 2, Sc7)

Consequentialism / Teleology

It refers to the theory that the consequences of a particular action form the basis for any valid moral judgement about the action, i.e., a morally right action produce a good outcome. In other words, "end justifies the means". The consequences of the action decide the rightness and wrongness of the action. In *The Tempest*, Prospero the rightful duke of Milan was put to sea on a rotten carcass of a boat with his three year old daughter, Miranda by his usurping brother Antonio. Prospero seeks his revenge after twelve years by wrecking the ship in which his enemies travel, brings them to his island and using his power of magic, teaches them a lesson. "He draws them to his lonely island, where he has them at his mercy, but his object is to pardon them and change their hate to love" (Legious 432). What Prospero does cannot be termed as a proper course of action- he plots revenge on his enemies and through magic, intimidation and trickery succeeds in his plans, by his art he enslaves Caliban and Ariel. But, applying the philosophy of teleology, what he does is morally right since he is a ruler whom treason has dispossessed and deprived of power. Moreover, he forgives the people who have hurt him the most: "For you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother / Would even infect my mouth I do forgive / Thy rankest fault, all of them..." (Act 5, Sc 1). He sacrifices his magic, forgives his enemies and sets free his slaves.

State consequentialism / Mohist consequentialism

It is an ethical theory that evaluates the moral worth of an action based on how much it contributes to the basic good of a state. The belief is that the importance of outcomes that is good for the community outweighs the importance of individual pleasure and pain, good and bad. In the play, *Julius Caesar*, Brutus resolves to kill Caesar to protect Rome from what he might do once he is in power. Brutus thinks that if Caesar is given power he will become corrupt and this will bring harm to Rome. He is afraid that power "...might change his nature, there's the question" (Act 2, Sc1). Brutus believes that Caesar would be completely unemotional and would rely solely on reason and will let power go to his head and bring damage to Rome. He is reminded of situations where people who climb the ladder of ambition lose their noble character once they reach their superior positions. So Brutus decides: "So Caesar may / Then lest he may, prevent" (Act 2, Sc1).

Deontology

Deontology determines goodness or aptness from examining acts, or the rules and duties that the person doing the act strove to fulfill. Immanuel Kant's theory of ethics states that it is not the outcome of the action that makes them right or wrong, but the motives of the person who carries out the action. Hamlet is the fitting example for elucidating this philosophy. Although the consequences of Hamlet's actions are severe and leads to the death of umpteen innocent victims, in the light of deontology, what he has done is right. His actions should be judged on the purpose it serves. Hamlet's father is unjustly killed by Claudius and Gertrude. The ghost of his father visits Hamlet and says: "But know, thou noble youth, the serpent that / Did sting thy father's life now wears his crown" (Act1, Sc 1).

Thus it becomes Hamlet's responsibility to avenge his father's death even though it comes at the price of many lives. He considers his situation rationally and chooses the mode of action which is right. He has no choice but to avenge his father's death, kill the murderer who has now married his mother and usurped the throne of Denmark.

Anarchist Ethics

Solidarity, equality and justice are the three fundamental ideas on which anarchist ethics is based. It upholds the idea that nobody wishes to be ruled or deceived. Nobody wishes to have the fruits of labour stolen from them. The sense of equality revolts at such ideas. The equation between Caliban-Prospero, Ariel-Sycorax and Ariel-Prospero are examples for anarchist ethics. Prospero becomes master of the monster Caliban and forces him into submission by punishing him with magic if he does not obey. Ariel is beholden to Prospero after he is freed from his imprisonment inside the pine tree. Both Ariel and Caliban want to be free of their master. Prospero is accused by Caliban of stealing his island and usurping all that he had.

Eco centric Ethics

It recognizes that all species including humans are the product of a long evolutionary process and are totally interrelated in their life processes. Shakespeare stresses that nature reflects man and man reflects nature. Whatever is in harmony with nature is virtuous and whatever is against nature is vicious. The unnatural acts in the world of man reverberate in nature as echoes in Macbeth's words:

*...Now o'er the one half world
Nature seems dead and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep. (Act 2, Sc 1)*

The whole of nature turns weird with grief over the generous Duncan's murder by Macbeth .

Ross: And Duncan's horses...

.....
*Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out
Contenting 'gainst obedience, as they would
Make war with mankind.*

Old man: 'Tis said they eat each other. (Act2, Sc 4)

An in-depth reading of Shakespeare takes us to the conclusion that he doesn't give us lectures on morality, but on the contrary, interspersed his works with pearls of wisdom and showed total sympathy with human nature, in all its shapes, drawbacks, highs and lows. Shakespeare's influence has shaped the education of generations of students. In the British education system, the 1990 National Curriculum in English lists Shakespeare as the only author that all British school children over the age of 13 must study (Curtis 2008). In America, according to the Washington Post, Shakespeare's works rank in the top 10 of high school theatre plays, and he has been on the list since the survey was first taken in 1937 (Strauss 2010). So there is no better vehicle than stories from Shakespeare, to drive home the values of life or ethical living to a schoolgoer. Shakespeare has provided future generations, coded inferences – revealed in the text of his works – that explore the enduring state of human values and concerns. There is no theoretical reasoning nor does he describe his practical or personal experiences. Harold Bloom has rightly said that Shakespeare has invented the modern human being. According to him a human being is a social creature capable of great emotion, logical thought and decisive action, one who has unlimited potential- one who questions and doesn't follow others blindly. Shakespeare focuses on the ability of his protagonists to question and seek out the truth before taking any action and also portrays what happens if they do not. He doesn't 'instruct' but helps the audience to pick his own conclusions as to what is good, bad, and justifiable and serves as an entertaining and exciting text of the otherwise satiating moral education. His plays make us finer species and bring discipline to humanity by making us thoughtful spectators of life.

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