

Willie's Pub

You've got a weekly journal assignment on the Shakespeare Film Analysis Project, where you're working solo toward your final paper, an analysis of some aspect of these films that you want to analyze. Here, though, we'll talk about everything that comes up. You may not know what you want to analyze when we start, but pay attention. There ought to be a lot of good ideas floating around here as we go. So come to Willie's Pub and join us.

What's so great about Shakespeare?

by M.

All through out school all I heard was "To be or not to be, That is the question." Lord knows I've heard enough of Romero and Juliet, its like I just can't escape. I don't like Shakespeare, and I care about it as much as you care about my opinion. The main reason I don't like Shakespeare is the simple fact that its too old. Shakespeare is so old, I can't even understand some of the dialogue. Shakespeare's era was so long ago, I don't really relate to it. I don't even think there were knights back in his time.

Shakespeare being old is just one reason I don't like it, another is how redundant it is. Not so much the story but just hearing his name is like a bad song being played on every station and you wonder when everyone is going to stop requesting it. You keep wondering what makes the song so great but you'll never know. I would imagine that Shakespeare is great some how to have lasted this long. I just cant see what's so great, no one in my age group has even said he's great. I've never read any of its writings (of my free will anyway), but its not because I hate reading its just that I wouldn't be able to stand reading it and I wouldn't be able to understand it. Please tell me why Shakespeare is so great.

Re: What's so great about Shakespeare?

by Bill Franklin

Because you've asked me (with a please, no less) to tell you why Shakespeare is so great, I suppose I need to address the question instead of smiling and nodding knowingly from my living room chair. But I warn you--you've asked a complex question that can't be answered simply.

One of the ongoing challenges of human evolution is bringing the young into full ownership of their intellectual history. It's very complicated because there is so much of it, and it's very difficult because the human brain isn't really capable of grasping intricacies until about 25 years of age. This is not because us old folks want it that way. It's because that's the way it is. I hated Shakespeare in high school and didn't want to engage it in college. And it wasn't simply because of the way it was presented--it was hard. Very hard!

So my expectation, which you are meeting admirably, is that at your age and with

your current state of mental development, you don't like Shakespeare and don't want to like Shakespeare and don't understand why you should. OK. Fair enough. You're normal.

On to the reason for education--you will take over the world when us old folks die off. And the world is very much more complicated than anything you've ever had to deal with. If you are going to be smart enough to handle your part of the job, your brain has to continue to mature, it has to strengthen, and it has to learn to engage really difficult problems that involve really complicated language. Guess what! You'll never in your life encounter anyone who uses Shakespearean dialects or verbal constructs. Guess what else! You will encounter, over and over again, people who use unfamiliar dialects and verbal constructs. Do you simply say "yo, dude, i dont talk that way and you shouldnt either?" Do you think that sort of language will get you a complicated oil concession with the Brazilians, or negotiate a power-sharing protocol with the Taliban?

We study Shakespeare because we see ourselves in his characters, and that part is sometimes fun, sometimes instructive. But we also engage the language because in doing so our minds become more skilled in thinking as an adult in a complicated world.

I'll give you a bit of a personal story here. When I graduated with a degree in English, I didn't want to teach, I wanted to make money. So I went to work negotiating oil and gas leases. First thing I learned was that no one wanted to let a Texas oil man in the door--they thought I was there to steal their land. Second thing I learned was that I had to talk with these people in their language, whatever it was. In the Appalachian Mountains, there were a lot of hillbillies. I had to sit with a bootlegger one day, a Jehovah's Witness the next, a doctor the next. Each person had a different dialect and a different way of thinking. My job, always, was to figure out how to get them to sign a long document of very tiny print that they didn't trust.

It was never easy. I had to learn how to communicate with people who didn't speak my version of Austin-cool! They hated my music (just as I hated theirs) and they hated my clothes. But we had to talk, and I learned to shift my voice according to the language of the person I was dealing with. Sometimes it was low English. Sometimes it was high English. Only two or three times in fifteen years did I find my love of poetry coming in handy. I had to talk to Republicans and Democrats and evangelicals and alcoholics and hundreds of others. Every one of them with a different language.

Turns out there's a Shakespeare connection here. When the English came to the colonies, beginning in the sixteenth century while Shakespeare was writing for the London stage, they came to Virginia and many of them ended up in the hills and

hollows of Western Virginia. Because the mountains were hard to get around and roads were next to nonexistent, these communities of English settlers became very isolated. The language of Shakespeare is most accurately preserved in the most isolated back-woods communities of Appalachia.

Shakespeare sounded like hillbillies? Not like Kenneth Branagh or Ian McKellen? That's right. Now we associate Shakespeare with high-brow English hoitytoits, but he was a lot closer to sounding like the bootlegger I was talking about.

I'm not addressing your question directly, but let's talk a bit about what's so great about Shakespeare. As you encounter the rest of the course, you'll see two very powerful stories that say a great deal about human nature. You'll see a film that sets Shakespeare in the context of his time without including a single word about Shakespeare. And you'll watch what seems to be a light-and-fluffy love comedy that pulls all of these things together. And you'll see that what's so appealing about this writer is that he seems, over and over, to find a really interesting situation to portray. It's never about the setting or the century or the costumes--those are all incidental. What Shakespeare is always about is the human mind engaging the slings and arrows of an outrageously complicated universe. He not only shows us these characters working through their situations, but he gives us a master script that survives through the centuries. This is what's so great about him, but it may be years before your mind is ready to engage him at his level.

If ever.

The problem of Shakespeare is exactly in the difficulty. The challenge for you is to embrace that difficulty. You may or may not ever come to actually enjoy a Shakespeare performance, or get to the point where you read his sonnets for the shimmering beauty of their language. But whether that happens or not, you need to engage the challenge for what it'll do to your still growing brain.

Re: Re: What's so great about Shakespeare?

by K.

Wow! This was a lot to think about. It really makes me wonder if one day I will understand him easily. I truly want that challenge in life and with my brain. And then, this is why I am in this class. A challenge in a foreign field for me. I may watch movies, but I have never paid attention to the screenplay writer or producer. The scenes and actors of course, but this is all new to me. So I hope I learn in many aspects about all this. I have to admit that Shakespeare is something I think I could grow to like and appreciate more. Probably not understanding it all, but the challenge might be fun. I say there needs to be a study drama II class. This should be expanded into more films into another class!

Re: What's so great about Shakespeare?

by E.

I understand in our days of age Shakespeare is not that good. But if you think about the history and stories most of today's romance films derive from Shakespearian drama, the way Shakespeare constructed his plays was really popular back in the day. But if people back then had satellite t.v. and internet, they wouldn't have paid much attention to Shakespeare.

Re: Re: What's so great about Shakespeare?

by Bill Franklin

Hmmmm. And whose writings would they have paid attention to? Or do you think "satellite t.v. and internet" things are written by something besides a writer?

Re: What's so great about Shakespeare?

by D.

One of the things that's so great about Shakespeare is he is so great. Meaning that you should be interested in Shakespeare even if you don't like his writing if only because almost every major writer afterward and many many artists in general have been so heavily influenced by Shakespeare. Its kind of like the Bible. I am not a Christian and I do not believe in the bible at all, but I am still interested in it as a student and have no problem studying it, regardless of how much I like the text, because it is such an important and influential work of literature throughout history.

And you say that you don't really relate to it. The thing that I find so great about Shakespeare is how he can put love, hate, and every other abstract emotion there is into dialogue. Everybody can relate to love, falling intensely in love with somebody, or not being able to be with the one you love, whatever. Everybody knows love. And yet this concept is so hard to clearly illustrate and put into words and dialogue. But Shakespeare pulls it off marvelously. He can articulate all these different emotions so well, even though you may have to kind of decode what he is saying. Once you read some footnotes or whatever and see what he is actually trying to get across to the audience you think "oh yeah, I know what he's talking about, I've felt just like that before." Then you can go back and re-read or view the work with your new gained knowledge and comprehension of it and then all that work pays off when you get to just sit back and marvel at how good it all is with your fancy scholarly understanding. And you may say that you don't care about love or reading about it. You think love is stupid. You prefer stomping on butterflies and laughing when old people fall down to sweet syrupy love stories. Well Shakespeare has villains for you. And if not a villain then some other character who you can relate to. Sure you haven't had a murder conspiracy carried out against you like Caesar,

but who hasn't had friend talk about them behind their back, or been backstabbed in some sort of way. Everyone has felt Othello's fierce jealousy, even if they haven't murdered their wife. Or maybe you are the one that has been wrongly accused by the misunderstanding jealous lover. Everybody has been duped or felt the satisfaction of a successful duping at some time in their life. And Shakespeare takes these common emotions and feelings and weaves these fantastic and elaborate plots out of them. And an elaborate plot will intersect with another plot in the same story and you get to see all this great interwinding scheming play out and build up through the duration of the play up to the grand finale. But since it is based on these common emotions you empathize with the characters and go through all these crazy plot twists and convolutions with them and there is usually lots of irony to enjoy due to the audience knowing more than the characters involved in such schemes and it is just great. Its not the set and the setting or the time period you should care about but the characters and their great inner and outer dialogue and the elaborate plots and schemes all born out of common emotions that make Shakespeare so great. You just have to work harder than usual to see it.

Re: Re: What's so great about Shakespeare?

by M

Okay, I see where you're going and I do agree to some degree. I don't know if wanting to read Shakespeare just because others before me have read it is a good idea, but if I were going into the writing field then it would be a good idea. When I said that I didn't really relate to Shakespeare, what I meant was all the weird stuff. I mean things like killing your wife, marrying your sister, and I really hated the part in the movie we most recently watch, when her dad started trying to kill his own daughter because he thought she wasn't a virgin anymore. You're right about the love and hate thing but that's like saying I relate to a dog because we both have a heart and bones. The bottom line is I haven't read enough Shakespeare to form a true opinion but I don't think I'll be reading his work anytime soon without being forced for a class.

Re: Re: Re: What's so great about Shakespeare?

by K

I love to hear all of the points of view that I am hearing. This is because I can usually see them after someone points them out to me. All I usually think of when I hear Shakespeare is love, different time period, and I know their speaking is different. But someone like you, M, sees other things that I may not have noticed. We all are different and that's what makes us having to watch movies such as this okay. Honestly, this is why I chose this class. To have to watch something and finally learn about something that I would not have done before. So all of you help me. It's amazing the different views and feelings people have over books and films. This is why some writers are

better than others. That certain audience that liked that one film is larger than the other audience. I can't wait to see the other Shakespeare films. Keep helping me see other things you guys!
