

Why Study Shakespeare?

The Reasons Behind Shakespeare's Influence and Popularity

Ben Jonson anticipated Shakespeare's dazzling future when he declared, "He was not of an age, but for all time!" in the preface to the [First Folio](#). While most people know that Shakespeare is, in fact, the most popular dramatist and poet the Western world has ever produced, students new to his work often wonder why this is so. The following are the top four reasons why Shakespeare has stood the test of time.

1) Illumination of the Human Experience

Shakespeare's ability to summarize the range of human emotions in simple yet profoundly eloquent verse is perhaps the greatest reason for his enduring popularity. If you cannot find words to express how you feel about love or music or growing older, Shakespeare can speak for you. No author in the Western world has penned more beloved passages. Shakespeare's work is the reason John Bartlett compiled the first major book of familiar quotations. Here are some examples of Shakespeare's most popular passages:

- [The seven ages of man](#)
- [Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?](#)
- [We band of brothers](#)
- [The green-eyed monster](#)
- [What's in a name?](#)
- [Now is the winter of our discontent](#)
- [If music be the food of love](#)
- [Beware the ides of March](#)
- [We are such stuff as dreams are made on](#)
- [Something is rotten in the state of Denmark](#)
- [To be, or not to be: that is the question](#)

2) Great Stories

Marchette Chute, in the *Introduction* to her famous retelling of Shakespeare's stories, summarizes one of the reasons for Shakespeare's immeasurable fame:

William Shakespeare was the most remarkable storyteller that the world has ever known. Homer told of adventure and men at war, Sophocles and Tolstoy told of tragedies and of people in trouble. Terence and Mark Twain told comedic stories, Dickens told melodramatic ones, Plutarch told histories and Hans Christian Andersen told fairy tales. But Shakespeare told every kind of story – comedy, tragedy, history, melodrama, adventure, love stories and fairy tales – and each of them so well that they have become immortal. In all the world of storytelling he has become the greatest name. (*Stories from Shakespeare*, 11)

Shakespeare's stories transcend time and culture. Modern storytellers continue to adapt Shakespeare's tales to suit our modern world, whether it be the tale of Lear on a farm in Iowa, Romeo and Juliet on the mean streets of New York City, or [Macbeth in feudal Japan](#).

3) Compelling Characters

Shakespeare invented his share of stock characters, but his truly great characters – particularly his tragic heroes – are unequalled in literature, dwarfing even the sublime

creations of the Greek tragedians. Shakespeare's great characters have remained popular because of their complexity; for example, we can see ourselves as gentle Hamlet, forced against his better nature to seek murderous revenge. For this reason Shakespeare is deeply admired by actors, and many consider playing a Shakespearean character to be the most difficult and most rewarding role possible.

4) Ability to Turn a Phrase

Many of the common expressions now thought to be clichés were Shakespeare's creations. Chances are you use Shakespeare's expressions all the time even though you may not know it is the Bard you are quoting. You may think that fact is "neither here nor there", but that's "the short and the long of it." Bernard Levin said it best in the following quote about Shakespeare's impact on our language:

If you cannot understand my argument, and declare "It's Greek to me", you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger, if your wish is father to the thought, if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool's paradise – why, be that as it may, the more fool you, for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it) quoting Shakespeare; if you think it is early days and clear out bag and baggage, if you think it is high time and that that is the long and short of it, if you believe that the game is up and that truth will out even if it involves your own flesh and blood, if you lie low till the crack of doom because you suspect foul play, if you have your teeth set on edge (at one fell swoop) without rhyme or reason, then – to give the devil his due – if the truth were known (for surely you have a tongue in your head) you are quoting Shakespeare; even if you bid me good riddance and send me packing, if you wish I were dead as a door-nail, if you think I am an eyesore, a laughing stock, the devil incarnate, a stony-hearted villain, bloody-minded or a blinking idiot, then – by Jove! O Lord! Tut, tut! for goodness' sake! what the dickens! but me no buts – it is all one to me, for you are quoting Shakespeare. (*The Story of English*, 145)

References

Chute, Marchette. *Stories from Shakespeare*. New York: World Publishing Company, 1956.
Levin, Bernard. Quoted in *The Story of English*. Robert McCrum, William Cran and Robert MacNeil. Viking: 1986).

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