

# Classics as Embodiment of Ideas in English Literature

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## Abstract

Literature has always been an embodiment of the collective consciousness of an age. Geographical boundaries help scholars categorize the literature coming from different regions, but the sources and forces inspiring literature are not limited by these boundaries. In ancient times, no national boundaries existed in Europe. Once, the landscape of English literature was a blend of various tribes, dialects, languages, cultures, and histories. It remained in the process of formation, until the time of Chaucer - after which the entire English literature gets divided into different ages.

Every age has its own masterpiece, which becomes the embodiment of the ideas represented by that particular age. English literature has always revisited and revived classical learning, with an eye on the future. The literary process has never worked in isolation; it is inter-connected with the history, culture, and sociopolitical realities of a certain age. This paper is focused on the Elizabethan age.

Keywords: Literature, Masterpiece, Culture, History and Revival

What makes a writer, a classical writer? Is it the fantastical setting or the stylistic writing? Or can it be the plot and the powerful formation of characters? The position of a 'classic' is fluid because it varies from reader to reader, location to location, and most importantly, era to era. However, there are texts which have stood the test of time and can help us understand and analyze which factors make a text a 'classic'.

Although there are no parameters that help us define 'classics', we can analyze the common threads among existing classics to arrive at a hypothesis. Classic texts showcase human experiences with such ease and well-defined patterns of expressions that it becomes easy for a common man to read and relate. They reflect the cultural and socio-political forces of their time, and help readers map the development of the collective consciousness of an age. So, a classical text can also be defined as a work that helps us to understand our collective consciousness. Writers explore human psyche and human complexities through their characters and through these characters they express universal truths about how we, as humans, perceive, observe and interact with the world around us. Classics unify their readers, who are reading them from different regions and in different ages. Location, culture, and time play a crucial role in making a text, a classic.

How relevant is the question of 'universality' in classics? We can never assume that all readers will perceive a text in the same manner. If there is such diversity in the readers' perception, how do the great classics embody universality of human spirit? While it may seem that individual consciousness is at odds with collective consciousness, it is in fact individual consciousness at different locations, times, and cultures that makes up collective consciousness. Individual consciousness is a drop in the ocean of collective consciousness. As Dr. Bhim Singh Dhaiya observes, "the sharper and stronger the encounter of ideas, the larger and more vigorous is the production of creative literature."

I would like to argue further that ‘Classics’ are the defining pieces of the age in which they were written, as foundational pieces to major literary movements. During the renaissance period, it was the ‘humanist spirit’ that was at the centre, and works by Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe embody this idea by dramatizing the humanist spirit and placing man at the centre of the universe. Although Shakespeare’s heroes are kings, princes, statesmen and generals; they are still representative of mankind than the social class they belong to, because their suffering is the representation of humanity. Even if they are found guilty of greater crimes, that also is a manifestation of their humanity. Their suffering, guilt and indecisiveness make them more human than heroes. Characters like Othello and Macbeth, Hamlet and Lear, Brutus and Anthony prove their heroism without any supernatural forces involved. Their heroism lies in their competence and flaws as humans, in individual morality instead of predetermined virtues.

When it comes to renaissance literature, Shakespearean tragedies have stood the test of time. This is because Shakespearean tragedies are the embodiment of realism and secularism. English tragedies are considered more realistic than the Roman tragedies, and more secular than the Greek tragedies. English tragedies deal with human situations which are realistic and life-like, while Greek tragedies are dominated by the dicta of Gods and destiny. Shakespeare explored jealousy, love, indecisiveness, revenge, and other human conditions without the bias of preconceived notions. His tragedies stayed committed to the ideas of secularism and realism.

There are many factors that make Shakespeare’s works classics, and one such factor is the position of women in his plays. He accords central position to women, be it Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* or Cordelia in *King Lear*. These women are created with the agency to form their own perspectives and choices. The position of women during the renaissance age cannot be called glorious. Henry VIII’s treatment of women, which included abandoning and killing his wives, was not an exception. Even Virginia Woolf questioned the position of women in Shakespeare’s time. She questioned the absence of women’s freedom to read and write, and to enjoy the rights that their male counterparts enjoyed. In fact, the roles of women in Shakespeare’s dramas were once played by men because women were not allowed to be on stage. Shakespeare granted freedom to his female characters - despite the restrictions of their social roles, they could aspire for greater positions. In the reign of Queen Elizabeth, he wrote works like *The Rape of Lucrece*, which shows that he wrote not for heroes or gods but for all, even the beings who were controlled and not allowed to read, write, or play.

Shakespeare eschewed the conventions of his time and created his own style. He introduced a sense of freedom in literature through his experiments with dialogue and form. Shakespeare didn’t write without inspirations and sources. In his plays, foreign and the native influences are combined. And this combination includes ancient, medieval, and contemporary sources of drama. As was the case with poetry, the spread of drama too began from Italy, to France, then to England. Plautus gave the model for comedies whereas Seneca became a guiding light for tragedies. Shakespeare stood closer to the Senecan practice, considered murders as offstage action, and bloodshed was informed or reported by messengers or actors.

Plays by Shakespeare were not ignorant of the reality of ‘human life’. His plays are not only the embodiment of the sensibility of the age they were written in, but are relevant till date. His characters suffered like the common man, and dealt with their problems like the common man, which made them approachable to the masses. Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies have been adapted into films and also reached masses who aren’t able to read or aren’t interested in reading. In Indian Cinema, films like

*Haider*, *Maqbool* and *Omkara* are adaptations of *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*, respectively. These films were huge successes when released, proving that even in the twenty first century; Shakespeare is one of the greatest tragedians because of his stories and raw representation of human anxieties.

The further scope of this study lies in the following questions: What will be the parameters or factors that will make a work a classic, hundred years from now? How long will the current ‘classics’ still be regarded as classics? How will an increasingly globalised world engage with classics? Will classics continue to hold value and espouse universality for the future generation of readers, who will most likely come from extremely diverse backgrounds? This interaction between classics and contemporary literary trends is likely to form an interesting area of research for scholars of English Studies.

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