UNIT 9: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE: *MACBETH* I

UNIT STRUCTURE

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9.1 LEARNING OBJECTICVES

After going through this unit, the learner will be able to:

- discuss the life and works of William Shakespeare
- explain the background of the play
- gain a brief insight into the literary treasures of William Shakespeare in the history of English Literature

9.2 INTRODUCTION

The present unit takes up one of the most popular plays of all time known as *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare. But before, we explore the detailed content of the play, we shall gain an insight into the life and works of this great figure who had unravelled the canons of English literature with his unparalleled talent and popularity through the ages.

9.3. WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE : THE DRAMATIST

William Shakespeare was one of the greatest known literary figures of English literature. Let us first explore the life of Shakespeare and the times in which he wrote.

9.3.1 His Life

William Shakespeare who is also popularly known as “the Bard of Avon” was born on April 26th, 1564. Traditionally, however, his birth is celebrated on April 23rd which is also known to have been the date of his death. He was the eldest of the eight children of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden of Stratford-of-Avon. Of their eight children, only five survived through childhood. John Shakespeare was essentially a tradesman dealing with gloves and other commodities by occupation, but played a significant part in local affairs and later went on to become a bailiff in 1568. William Shakespeare’s mother came from a higher social standing than her husband. After marriage she witnessed the gradual decline of fortunes of her husband. William, like his other brothers, was given education in a local grammar school.

On November 28, 1582, William Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, a wealthy widow who was eight years senior to him. Hathaway was from the village of Shottery which was at the vicinity of Stratford. Shakespeare sired a daughter Suzanna who was born in 1853 and the twins, Hamnet and Judith, who were born in the year 1585.It has been stated in archival records that Shakespeare began as a schoolmaster in the countryside. In 1587, an actor of a theatre company called Queen’s Men was killed before it could reach Stratford, and according to legend it may have filled up the vacancy, leading to his future rise as a renowned playwright.

Later, he became a leading member of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men in 1594. Shakespeare became prosperous as he worked with the Chamberlain’s Men, and soon the theatre group became the leading theatre company of London and succeeded in occupying the famous **Globe Theatre** in 1599. The group soon came to be known as the King’s Men. Shakespeare flourished as a playwright and in the year 1610, he left London for his hometown, where he began to live in a new residence at a place called New Place. His relationship with the theatre company ceased when the Globe Theatre was burnt down during a performance in 1613. During the last years of his life, Shakespeare became more involved with Stratford and his children, especially with regard to the marriage of his daughters.

Nevertheless, his connection with the theatre world did not perish and he continued composing works. Shakespeare passed away on April 23rd 1616 and was buried in Holy Trinity.



LET US KNOW

GLOBE THEATRE: It was a large polygonal, thatched building, with a centre open to the sky. It was used for the purpose of theatre performance



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q1. Write a few lines on the William Shakespeare's origins.

Q2. Briefly describe the famous Globe theatre

9.3.2 His Works

William Shakespeare is credited to have composed a large volume of works during his lifetime. The earliest among his writings were the two long poems *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594). As it was the tradition of that time, these poems were written in the form of long speeches. Another compilation of verse called *The Passionate Pilgrim* came out in 1599, but it did not have the unique appealing quality of his later poetic compositions, that is, the *Sonnets*.

The *Sonnets* of Shakespeare was printed in the year 1609 by Thomas Thorpe. The sonnets were dedicated to a mysterious "Mr. W.H" whose identity aroused the curiosity of one and all. The probable explanation regarding the identity of W.H was that he was a patron of William Shakespeare, and it was highly possible that he was referring to William Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke. There are a total number of 154 sonnets, which have been divided into two groups. The first group comprises of sonnets written on themes of friendship and are passionately addressed to a "fair youth". These sonnets reflect the poet's personal relationship with a

young man, probably belonging to a high rank. The second group comprises of sonnets addressed to a "Dark Lady" who is regarded as the mistress of the poet. The sonnets are a celebration of the victory of love, beauty and friendship over Time and Death, even when human life is subjected to the hurdles and obstacles laid by destiny. The poetic style of Shakespeare with his beautiful use of symbolic ideas make the sonnets immortal literary pieces. Edward Albert states in the *History of English Literature* that "If Shakespeare had not been our greatest dramatist, he would still be numbered among our greatest lyrical poets."

There has been great discussion regarding the volume of dramatic pieces composed by Shakespeare. The reason behind this is the fact that most of the texts were not printed during his lifetime. Sixteen of these plays appeared during his lifetime in the form of quarto and it was seven years after his death that the First Folio comprising of thirty six plays, came out. As such, the plays of Shakespeare have been divided into different types, in terms of their subject. The early plays written by Shakespeare are called the early comedies. This comprised of the plays such as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Comedy of Errors*, *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Love Labour's Lost.*

These plays were filled with wit and word play but they lacked the finesse in characterisation seen in his later plays. The comedies that were composed in his later life were more mature in terms of their subject matter and characterisation. The group of mature comedies includes *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *As You Like It*. In these plays it is seen that Shakespeare has given special focus to the women characters, representing them as strong-willed and independent women who have ideas of their own regarding the world. Whether it is the witty Beatrice or the wise and practical Portia, Shakespeare's plays are filled with such unforgettable and vivacious women characters.

Dramatic pieces such as *Richard II, Henry IV- Part 1, Henry IV-Part 2* and *Henry V* reflect the development in the dramatic techniques of Shakespeare. The playwright's intermingling of real historical figures belonging to the court alongside commoners, and their interactions, was a remarkable innovation in his writings. He represented the kings and the princes as more mature

and responsible figures, conscious of the needs of their subjects.

Plays such as *Measure for Measure, All's Well That Ends Well, Troilus and Cressida* are called the problem plays. Although the protagonists in these plays do not die, the tone is cynical and bleak. The problem plays essentially reflect disillusionment towards life. Shakespeare has created characters and situations sans the romance and mirth that was seen in the earlier comedies. These plays attempted to show some of the dark realities of Shakespeare's contemporary society. The problem plays, however, did not explore the psychological complexities of the characters as much as the four Great Tragedies of the bard: *Hamlet*, *Othello, Macbeth* and *King Lear.* Shakespeare was at the height of his art when he composed these tragedies. No other dramatic composition has influenced the world of theatre so much than these four masterpieces. The emotional depth and passion reflected in his protagonists has been the subject of study since ages. In the nature of Aristotle's definition of a tragedy, the heroes in his tragedies suffer from *hamartia* or tragic flaw in character, that lead to their destruction. Hamlet was indecisive or passive, Othello suffered from jealousy, Macbeth suffered because of his ambition and Lear's tragic flaw was his pride.

Shakespeare had also composed a few plays based on the Roman histories. These include *Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra,* and *Coriolanus*. The Roman plays were based on the translation of Plutarch's *Lives*. The Roman historical characters were written keeping into mind the subject of political intrigues and governance. Some of his last plays were *The Winter's Tale, Cymbeline* and *The Tempest* .The playwright had composed these plays in a rich, lucid style, varied in their subject matter, but similar in approach.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q3. What were the themes that emerged in the first and second group of sonnets?

Q4. What was Shakespeare's remarkable innovation while dealing with historical figures in his plays?

Q5. Name the last two plays by Shakespeare during his literary journey.

9.4 BACKGROUND OF THE PLAY

The tragedy *Macbeth* was written and performed in the Globe Theatre in 1606. However, it was only in the year 1623 that the first folio was printed. It is believed that Shakespeare had borrowed the subject of the play from a play written by Thomas Middleton. The play was performed in front of James I, who is believed to be as the descendent of the real Banquo who is shown as one of the significant characters in the play. One of the main motives of Shakespeare in writing Macbeth was to examine the nature and evils of political ambition that exists in a monarchical state. *Macbeth*, in the manner of his other major tragedies such as *King Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Othello*, is one of the most intriguing plays of Shakespeare that provides the readers an insight into the complexities of political relationships in an ambition driven society. An interesting aspect about the play is that it is the shortest play by Shakespeare. Yet it is considered to be the most intense of the Shakespearean tragedies.

Macbeth is based on the real events from the life of Macbeth, the eleventh century king of Scotland. Shakespeare had read numerous accounts of Macbeth, principally from the *Chronicles* of Holinshed. Holinshed's historical accounts provided the primary source for many of Shakespeare's historical dramas. According to Holinshed's account, Macbeth and Banquo conspired to assassinate King Duncan, the erstwhile ruler of Scotland. This incident provided the base for the tragedy that was recorded as an interesting narrative.

The play tells us about Macbeth and Banquo who are the generals of King Duncan, returning after a successful battle against rebels of the kingdom. On the way, they come across three witches who predict that Macbeth will be assigned an important position in the kingdom and later, he would become the king. They also prophesised that Banquo's successors would become kings, though he would never be one.

The early history of the play *Macbeth* is equally interesting. The play was first performed for King James I, ruler of England after the notoriously infamous Gunpowder Conspiracy in which a group of Catholics attempted

to assassinate the king by blowing up the entire Parliament. The play is politically significant as it deals with ambition, treason and the killing of a king. King James's interest in the subjects of supernatural elements and kingship too influenced Shakespeare in the composition of the play. Further, the king had a Scottish ancestry and *Macbeth* deals with the life and times of the early kings of Scotland. As such it clearly appealed to him. King James the First's fascination towards good governance and virtues of a king was so strong that he went on to write *Basilikon Doron* in 1599 that deals with the subject of qualities of an ideal king. Shakespeare mentioned these qualities in Act IV of *Macbeth* where Malcolm speaks of "Justice, Verity, Temperance, Stableness, Bounty, Perseverance, Mercy, Lowliness, Devotion, Patience, Courage, Fortitude." Macbeth possessed none of these qualities and his greatest vice was his pride together with his unquenchable thirst for power.

The play was a success during its time, and it continues to be re-enacted on the stage even today. There have been several adaptations of the play that have been made into other forms of narratives such as films, all over the world. For example, in India, *Macbeth*, has been adapted into a film titled Maqbool by Vishal Bharadwaj where the entire plot takes place in a contemporary time and space. It shows that the subject matter of Shakespeare's works have universally appealed to people regardless of time and place.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS



Q6. When was the tragedy *Macbeth* written? From whom did Shakespeare borrow the subject of the play?

Q7. When was *Macbeth* first performed or staged?

Q8. Why was the play politically significant?

Q9. What are the essential qualities of a King as described in the last act of *Macbeth*? Did Macbeth possess these qualities?



9.5 LET US SUM UP

After going through the unit, you will be able to learn about the life and works of William Shakespeare. Also, the discussion on the background of the play will help you comprehend the setting and context of the play while also gaining a brief insight into the literary contributions of William Shakespeare in the history of English literature



9.6 FURTHER READING

1) Albert, Edward. (2000) *History of English Literature*, Fifth Edition. Oxford : Oxford University Press.

2) Birch, Dinah. (2009) *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Seventh Edition. Oxford : Oxford University Press.



9.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: William Shakespeare was one of the greatest known literary figures of English literature. Shakespeare who is famously known as “the Bard of Avon” was born on April 26th, 1564. He was the eldest of the eight children of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden of Stratford-of-Avon. Of their eight children, only five survived childhood. John Shakespeare was essentially a tradesman dealing with gloves and other commodities by occupation, but played a significant part in local affairs and later went on to become a bailiff in 1568. After marriage, Mary Arden witnessed the gradual decline of fortunes of her husband. William, like his other brothers, was given education in a local grammar school.

Ans to Q No 2: Globe Theatre was a large polygonal, thatched building, with a centre open to the sky. It was used for the purpose of theatre performances.

Ans to Q No 3: The first group comprises of sonnets written on themes of friendship and are passionately addressed to a "fair youth". These sonnets reflect the poet's personal relationship with a young man, probably belonging to a high rank. The second group comprises of sonnets addressed to a "Dark Lady" who is regarded as the mistress of the poet.

Ans to Q No 4: The playwright's intermingling of real historical figures belonging to the court alongside commoners, and their interactions, was a remarkable innovation in his writings. He represented the kings and the princes as more mature and responsible figures, conscious of the needs of their subjects.

Ans to Q No 5: Some of the last plays of William Shakespeare were *The Winter's Tale, Cymbeline* and *The Tempest.*

Ans to Q No 6: The tragedy *Macbeth* was written and performed in the Globe Theatre in 1606. However, it was only in the year 1623 that the first folio was printed. It is believed that Shakespeare had borrowed the subject of the play from a play written by Thomas Middleton.

Ans to Q No 7: The early history of the play *Macbeth* is equally interesting. The play was first performed for King James I, ruler of England after the notoriously infamous Gunpowder Conspiracy in which a group of Catholics attempted to assassinate the king by blowing up the entire Parliament.

Ans to Q No 8: The play is politically significant as it deals with ambition, treason and the killing of a king. King James's interest in the subjects of supernatural elements and kingship too influenced Shakespeare in the composition of the play. Further, the king had a Scottish ancestry and *Macbeth* deals with the life and times of the early kings of Scotland. As such it clearly appealed to him. King James the First's fascination towards good governance and virtues of a king was so strong that he went on to write *Basilikon Doron* in 1599 that deals with the subject of qualities of an ideal king.

Ans to Q No 9: Shakespeare mentioned these qualities in Act IV of *Macbeth* where Malcolm speaks of "Justice, Verity, Temperance, Stableness, Bounty, Perseverance, Mercy, Lowliness, Devotion, Patience, Courage, Fortitude." Macbeth possessed none of these qualities and his greatest vice was his pride together with the unquenchable thirst for power.



9.8 MODEL QUESTIONS

Q.1. Write a note on the life of William Shakespeare.

Q.2. Discuss the literary works of William Shakespeare.

Q.3. Discuss the background of the play *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare.

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