OPOSICIONES DE INGLES

SECUNDARIA

UNIT 44

SHAKESPEARE AND HIS AGE

MOST CHARACTERISTIC WORKS

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1. INTRODUCTION

In this unit we are going to look at one of Britain's most famous ever writers, **William Shakespeare.** The present unit aims to provide a detailed account of the relationship between the figure of Shakespeare and the Tudor/Elizabethan Age so as to link his literature productions with the main Elizabethan literature masterpieces. In order to analyse these links we shall present the social, historical, cultural and linguistic background of England during the Tudor Age (1485-1603) and its social background. Then we will focus on the bibliography of Shakespeare and the characteristics of his main works.

The reference books that we will refer to are:

Baugh, Cable. A History of the English language.
Fernandez. A History of English.
The New Historicism by Veeser

We will begin by looking at the historical background.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Queen Elizabeth I came to the throne in 1558 and ruled England until 1603. Her reign brought stability to the country, and with stability came prosperity. In order to see how important peace and order were to the Elizabethans, it is useful to contrast Elizabeth's reign with the insecurity and unrest of earlier ages.

Elizabeth's grandfather, **Henry Tudor**, became **King Henry VII** of England in 1485. His accession and subsequent marriage to **Elizabeth of York** put an end to the civil wars which had raged in England for almost a hundred years. **Henry VII** concentrated on reducing friction at home and abroad and on establishing a strong, financially secure monarchy.

He was succeeded in 1509 by his son, **Henry VIII** who married a Spanish princess, **Catherine of Aragon.** This marriage did not produce a son and so Henry VIII divorced her. The divorce was condemned by the **Catholic Church** and, gradually, a split developed between the Pope and Henry. Henry died in 1547, and at that time England was still largely a Catholic country, Catholic that is, in practice, though the supreme spiritual authority of the Pope had been challenged, and many Protestant reformers were eager to spread Protestantism in England.

Henry VIII was succeeded by his 9-year-old son, **Edward,** born to his third wife, **Jane Seymour**. Edward and his regents furthered the spread of Protestantism. Edward died in 1553 and was followed to the throne by **Mary I,** the daughter of **Henry** and **Catherine**. She attempted to restore Catholicism to England, executing about 300 reformants including bishops (an act that earned her the name *Bloody Mary*), but she too died childless and was succeeded in 1558 by her Protestant half-sister, **Elizabeth I**, daughter of **Henry VIII** and **Anne Boleyn.**

Elizabeth adopted what may be called a *middle way* course as far as religion was concerned. She broke the link with Rome, but retained many of the practises and beliefs of the old religion. Her "middle way" satisfied most of her subjects and for the majority of her reign religious strife was avoided. Many different religious sects became established in England during this time however, among them the **Puritans** who were very critical of the theatre.

This affected the plays that were being written, as too did the social environment.

3. SOCIAL BACKGROUND

In spite of the political and religious turmoil of the reigns before Elizabeth's, most Elizabethans were convinced that they lived in an ordered universe, a universe in which God was supreme and in which angels, men, animals, plants and stones had their allotted place.

The Christian view that mankind was redeemed by Christ was rarely challenged by Elizabethans, although points of detail might be argued about. In spite of the teaching that Adam's fall had, to some extent, spoiled God's plan for mankind, there was a widely held belief in universal order and harmony. The stars and the planets were still in accordance with the divine plan and it was believed that they gave glory to God by the music of their movement.

Shakespeare expresses this idea in *The Merchant of Venice* when Lorenzo tells Jessica:

Such harmony is in immortal souls,

Before Adam's fall, man too could hear the heavenly harmonies. Although the fall put an end to this ideal state, the heavenly bodies continued to influence life on earth. Just as the sun gave warmth and light, so too did the stars and the planets affect the earth and its inhabitants. Most Elizabethans attributed certain types of behaviour to astrological causes, such as one's birth sign, or the relative position of the planets at a particular time. Some people even believed that individual parts of the body were under the control of specific planets or constellations.

The Elizabethans, like many people before and since then, were aware of man's paradoxical position in nature. He was influenced by the stars and the planets, subject to his passions and, at the same time, made in the image and likeness of God.

Man was most in harmony with nature and with his creator, it was believed, when his reason controlled his emotions. A similar truth was believed to apply to the state.

Natural disorders, like storms and earthquakes, were paralleled by passionate outbursts in the individual and by disputes in the state. These views are more clearly seen in such plays as *King Lear* and *Othello* where natural storms symbolise the turmoil and the confusion of the characters, but they were commonly held in Elizabethan times. We can also see some evidence of these views in *The Tempest* where the havoc caused by the storm in the first act symbolises the confusion that evil actions can bring into the world.

Elizabeth's reign also marked an increase in voyages of discovery and in the growth of public interest in such voyages. In 1587, **Sir Francis Drake** set out on a voyage around the world, a voyage that took almost three years to complete. His voyages inspired the imagination of other Englishmen. The accurate accounts of newly contacted people and places, strange and imaginative stories were told, and the setting of plays such as *The Tempest* was in part a response to the interest of ordinary English people in the wonders beyond their own island.

Now that we have seen some of the background to the time in which Shakespeare was writing, we should look at some of the background to the theatre that he was writing for.

4. HISTORY OF ELIZABETHAN DRAMA

Records on drama in English go back to the Middle Ages, a period in which numerous *Miracle* and *Morality* plays were written. Such plays were often based on biblical themes, especially those involving miraculous events such as the saving of Noah and his family in the ark, or those from which a clear moral could be drawn.

Medieval plays were normally written to coincide with such festivals as Christmas or Easter and they were often performed in or near the church, with most of the community taking part, either actively by playing a role, or passively, as a member of the audience.

In the Medieval period, drama was an important element in the structure of society. It was, in many ways, an extension of Christian ritual, and was meant to make a strong impression on all who participated in the performance. Audiences were meant to be in awe of the power and the wisdom of God, inspired by the faith and the courage of holy men, frightened by the fate of those who did evil, and amused by the folly of mankind.

Drama in the period was thus meant to have a cathartic effect, that is, it was meant to improve the members of the audience by giving them an outlet for such emotions as greed, lust, pity, etc.

They were encouraged to identify with a character often called **Everyman** who represented all men in their journey through life. The drama of the time, like Everyman himself, had a universal appeal. It was written, not for a small elite, but with all members of the society in mind.

In the early 16th century the close relationship that had previously existed between the church and the state began to change. Individual Christian sects had distinctly different attitudes to the role of drama in society. It was tolerated by Catholics, but condemned by Puritans who wished to "purify" the religious beliefs and attitudes and to encourage people to give up worldly pleasures so that they might attend to spiritual matters. Puritanism grew stronger, especially in towns and cities, in the 2nd half of the 16th century and people connected with drama - writers and actors - had to struggle against growing opposition.

Elizabethan dramatists often criticised Puritanism in their plays and there is evidence of such criticism in several of Shakespeare's plays, including *Twelfth Night*. Puritanical opposition to the theatre eventually succeeded in curtailing freedom of speech in drama when it sponsored the **Licensing Act** which was passed by Parliament in 1737.

In Shakespeare's day however, the theatre had the support of the court and many dramatists, including Shakespeare, continued the medieval tradition of producing plays which appealed to all classes and to different levels of intelligence and education.

Numerous Englishmen wrote plays in the 16th century, among them **John Lyly, Thomas Kyd** and **Thomas Nash**. One of the most talented was **Christopher Marlowe,** (1564-93). It is worth mentioning him here as he had some influence over Shakespeare.

Marlowe was born in the same year as Shakespeare but seems to have begun writing plays sooner. He was a gifted poet and many of his dramatic innovations were adopted by playwrights of his own and later generations. He was the first English dramatist to make use of blank verse extensively; that is, he frequently used an organised pattern of rhythm in his plays giving his verse the memorability of poetry, and the effortlessness of natural speech.

Marlowe was the forerunner of Shakespeare in that he centred his tragedies on one main character with whom the audience could identify, but he was closer than Shakespeare to the Medieval tradition in that his characters tend to behave like supernatural beings.

Shakespeare appears to have learned much from his contemporaries, especially Marlowe, and from the medieval dramatic tradition. He borrowed plots and ideas from many sources but they were transformed by his poetry and his dramatic talents.

Now that we have seen some of the history to his style of writing it is time to look at the Elizabethan theatre itself, as its means of construction and style was essential to the success of the plays that were staged.

5. THE ELIZABETHAN THEATRE

Drama became increasingly secularised during the 15th and 16th centuries and plays ceased to be performed in or near a church. Instead they were often staged in the courtyard of an inn. Putting on a performance in such a courtyard had several advantages. There were many doors that could be used for exits and entrances,

balconies that could represent battlements or towers, and, best of all, there were usually guests at the inns who were glad of some entertainment.

When the first theatre was built in London, in 1576, it seemed perfectly natural therefore, to build it according to the design of Elizabethan courtyards. The theatre had galleries and boxes around, and no roof so performances had to be cancelled when there was bad weather.

The 1576 theatre and those built subsequently differed from the courtyard in that they contained a large stage which stuck out from one wall into the auditorium. The poorer members of the audience were called *groundlings* and they stood around the stage throughout the performance.

The stage was not curtained from the audience and there was no scenery on it. Indications of where the scene occurred were built into the words of the play.
In Shakespeare's time, women were not allowed to perform on the public stage and the female roles were played by boys. This fact helps to explain why so many of Shakespeare's heroines, such as **Portia** in *The Merchant of Venice,* **Rosalind** in *As You Like It* and **Viola** in *Twelfth Night* disguise themselves as young men. It was easier for a boy to act like a young man than like a young woman.

So far then, we have seen some of the background to Shakespeare's work. Now let us look at the background to the man himself.

6. THE LIFE OF SHAKESPEARE

We know very little about who Shakespeare was or how he lived. And, apart from the ideas expressed in his writings, we know nothing at all about how he thought or how he reacted to the events of his time. He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire[1] and was baptised there on April 26th 1564. His father, **John Shakespeare**, seems to have been reasonably wealthy at the time of his birth. He had business interests in farming, butchering and wool dealing and he held several public offices in Stratford until about 1578 when his business began to decline.

It seems likely, in view of his father's position, that William was educated at Stratford Grammar School. He did not, however, go to university and so did not have the type of education that many contemporary playwrights had.

William married **Anne Hathaway** in 1582 when he was 18 and she was 26 and, by 1585 they had 3 children, Susannah, born shortly after the marriage, and twins, Judith and Hamnet, born in 1585. We cannot be sure how he supported his family during this time. He may have been involved in his father's diminishing business, or he may, as some traditions suggest, have been a schoolmaster. Whatever he did, however, it did not satisfy him completely because he left Stratford and went to London.

Once again we cannot be sure when Shakespeare moved to London. It may have been in 1585, the year when a group of visiting players came to Stratford and

[1] **pron: worikshier**

performed their plays there. But we do know that he was living in London in 1592, by which time he was already known as a dramatist and as an actor.

In 1596 came personal grief and achievement. His son, Hamnet, died, and he and his family were granted a coat of arms which meant that their status as "gentlemen" was recognised by the College of Heralds. In 1599 he brought shares in the **Globe Theatre** (which was rebuilt in London in 1995) and in 1609 he became part owner of the **Blackfriars Theatre**. He died in Stratford on 23rd April 1616 at the age of 52.

With this knowledge of Shakespeare in mind, we will now look at some of his most characteristic works. This is perhaps best done through a series of groupings into the main headings, and looking at how some plays fall into those headings.

7. SHAKESPEARE'S MOST CHARACTERISTIC WORKS

There are many different groupings of the plays. We shall deal with those that are generally accepted as the four main genres of Shakespeare:

Tragedy
Comedy
History
Late Plays.

Some plays can be fitted into more than one category, and are sometimes alluded to as **problem plays.** It is a matter of opinion as to how useful this heading is. We will choose to ignore it. Among the common characteristics of his plays, we see that he never confined to one genre, most of his dramatic text are in blank verse and he had a liberal use of the language, borrowing from different sources.

Now we will give a basic outline of the general themes in each category and mention some of the most representative plays.

7. 1. Tragedy

We will begin by looking at how Shakespeare distanced his characters from the time so that they couldn't get confused with real people.

7.1.1. Distancing of Characters:

Lear and *Macbeth* are set in the distant past. *Hamlet* is set in Denmark. This means that they were removed from the Elizabethan court, and so avoided any speculation that they were based on characters that were alive at the time. This was important. If Shakespeare had offended anyone who thought that he or she was being portrayed in the play, then he could have been forbidden to write anymore plays, particularly if a nobleman or a member of the Royal Family took offence.

7.1.2. The Elizabethan View of World Order.

This placed the king at the top, and is examined in many of the plays. The king was seen as being God's representative on earth. He had a **divine right** to rule and any threat to this right had to be removed. This is seen particularly in plays such as *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. The plays examine the concept of ambition, and this is wonderfully demonstrated by Edmund in *King Lear.*

7.1.3. The Sanctity of Kingship

The murder of a king was not only seen as treason, but also as sacrilege as the king was God's representative on earth. When **Duncan** is murdered in *Macbeth* the sun is darkened, a falcon is killed by a mouse and the horses go against man. The whole of the recognised order of the world is turned upside-down. Likewise, when *King Lear* is deposed, the heavens open and we have perhaps one of the most brilliant of all Shakespearean scenes, the storm on the heath. The idea in both of these plays is that nature herself is offended and outraged by the manner in which the balance of world order has been upset.

7.1.4. The Desire for Power Overcomes Rationality.

This is seen in both *Macbeth* and *King Lear* where in the first, **Lady Macbeth** and her husband long for the throne, whilst in the second, **Goneril** and **Regan** cheat **Lear,** who is thrown out of the kingdom and loses his sanity. In the same play, the legitimate son, **Edgar**, is usurped by the bastard **Edmund.** Edgar strips himself of all his dignity and feigns madness as the beggar in the hovel.

7.1.5. The Natural Order is Restored

In *King Lear*, although the king dies, Goneril and Regan fail to gain control of the country, and the person left alive with the highest social standing, Edgar, assumes the role of king.

The next genre that we will look at is comedy.

7.2. Comedy

There are two main types of Shakespearean comedy; **Critical** and **Romantic.**

7.2.1 The Critical Comedies

These aim to bring out the absurdity or irrationality of our follies and make us laugh at them. Although Shakespeare's comedies often do this, most of them belong to the second category, Romantic, and as such this is the category that is most useful to examine.

7.2.2. The Romantic Comedies

These generally appeal to our liking for suspense. They are dramas of averted threat - the worst always threatens to happen, but never quite manages it - and as such the plays usually seem to begin with trouble but end with joy.

On the whole the comedies call for a willing suspension of disbelief on the part of the audience. Often characters are unrecognisable even to their closest of relatives thanks to the fact that they are wearing the most unconvincing disguises, such as can be seen in *The Winter's Tale* or *As You Like It.*

Women are often permitted to go against society's normal conception of the female role, (for example, **Beatrice** in *Much Ado About Nothing,* **Rosalind** in *As You Like It,* **Paulina** in *The Winter's Tale,* or any of the female characters in *The Taming Of The Shrew)* but in the end, Shakespeare inevitably makes them conform to the status that is expected from them. Subversive females never remain so for very long in Shakespeare's comedies.

Now we will move onto the history plays.

7.3. The History Plays

The main theme of the history plays is the emergence of a unified nation after the civil wars of the 15th century. There is imagined an idealised medieval world of order and ceremony, divinely sanctioned and approved by God.

Henry IV is one of eight plays dealing in sequence with a century of English history - the period of the **Wars of the Roses**, from the reign of **Richard II** (1377-99) to the defeat and death of **Richard III** at the **Battle of Bosworth** in 1485.

The eight plays fall into 2 sets of four, often referred to as the **1st and 2nd tetralogies.** The theme in the 1st tetralogy is that of the **tragic view of life.** God always interferes in human affairs and punishes sin. Through him and his divine retribution the correct order of society is inevitably re-established.

In the 2nd tetralogy the **sacramental nature of kingship** is still asserted, but it is possible for the king to be deposed, humiliated or murdered. Sometimes all three. Ultimately though, the inevitable theme of the correct order of society is firmly reinstated and any subversive elements are contained and defeated so that the natural ruler is left alone and in charge of a re-ordered nation.

Shakespeare didn't write the plays in historical order, in fact it seems as if he began in the middle. The first tetra contains the three parts of *Henry VI* and *Richard III.* The second tetra contains *Richard II, Henry IV (Parts I-II)* and *Henry V*.

The 4th and final category can be identified as the late plays.

7.4. Late Plays

These normally follow the pattern of pastoral romances. Evil never manages to triumph over goodness and life usually conquers death. This can be seen in *Cymbeline* where **Imogen** is not really dead, or *The Tempest* where **Ferdinand** and his father are restored to each other, when they both thought that the other had died in a storm.

Also in the late plays the gods are more benevolent and show acts of kindness to the mortals. Each play ends with the finding of something that had thought to have been lost, along with the union of a young couple. A good example of this is **Miranda** and **Ferdinand** in *The Tempest*. The endings normally contain the reconciliation of enemies, (**Prospero** and the duke in *The Tempest,* or **Leonates** and **Hermione** in *The Winter's Tale.)* All of the late plays show typical features, such as situations that are characterised by qualities of the unlikely, (are we really expected, for example, to believe that **Pauline** kept **Hermione** hidden from her husband for 16 years in *The Winter's Tale?)* or of mysterious, distant and exotic locations, such as the island in *The Tempest.*

To finish with, we would like to point out some of the characteristics of his sonnets.

7.5. Sonnets

Shakespeare's sonnets were published in 1609, but most of them were probably written much earlier, most likely in the 1590's. There are 154 sonnets in total, and together they suggest a *story* although the exact details of that story are elusive and mysterious.

According to some experts, the first 126 sonnets are addressed to a young man of great beauty, although there are some doubts about this theory. The speaker expresses his affection and admiration for the young man, urges him to marry and perpetuate his virtues through children, and at the same time warns him against the destructive power of time, age and moral weakness.

Shakespeare used his sonnets to explore different types of love between the young man and the speaker; the young man and the dark lady and the dark lady and the speaker. The dark lady is a woman described in Shakespeare sonnet's (127-154) and so called because the poems made it clear that she has black hair and coloured skin. The woman is more earthly, sexual and faithless- in direct opposition to the young man. Shakespeare explores universal questions about time and death, about beauty and moral integrity, about love and about poetry itself.

8. CONCLUSION

In this unit we have seen that Shakespeare wrote plays that have transcended the boundaries of time. The words that he wrote over 400 years ago can still be recognised as having meaning in today's world. This reflects the humanism of his work, he wrote about people in a way that people could understand. The fact that we can still see ourselves in the plays suggests that things have not changed so much in the last few centuries.

It is in the figure of Shakespeare that we have reviewed the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century by reviewing his life and career, his main works and finally, his wide range of masterpieces. So far, we have attempted to provide a glimpse of the vast amount of literature productions in Elizabethan Age, works which were shaped by the interesting historical and cultural background.

Language learners, even 2nd year Bachillerato students, do not automatically establish similiarities between British and Spanish literary works, which seem obvious to teachers; on the contrary, learners need to have these associations brought to their attention in cross-curricular settings. As we have seen, understanding how oral literature developed into written one is important to students, who are expected to be aware of the richness of English literature.

UNIT 44 SHAKESPEARE

THEMES **NOTES**

Queen Elizabeth 1558-1603. She brought stability. Many religious sects in England, especially Puritans. Critical of theatre.

Elizabethans thought they lived in ordered universe. Adam's fall had spoiled God's plan for mankind. Man most in harmony with nature and god when reason controlled emotions. Elizabeth's reign marked an interest in voyages of discovery. Plays were written about these. Medieval Morality plays formed the backbone of Elizabethan drama. Puritanism grew stronger and playwrights had to struggle against it. Elizabethan playwrights criticised it in their plays. Court supported theatre in Shakespeare's Day. Some influence from **Marlowe**. Plays were performed first near a church. Later in inns. First theatre in London in 1576. In Shakespeare's time women couldn't act in theatre.

Born 1564. Stratford.

Married Anne Hathaway in 1582 Had 3 children. Moved to London, possibly in 1585.Son died in 1596. 1599 bought shares in Globe. **Died in 1616.**

Four main genres:

Tragedy:

Distancing of characters. The Elizabethan view of world order. Sanctity of Kingship. Desire for power overcomes rationality Natural order restored. The subversive elements are crushed and the most senior member is left to rule.

Comedy

Critical: bring out absurdity or irrationality of our follies. **Romantic**: Appeal to our liking for suspense. Call for willing suspension of disbelief. Subversive females are controlled. They are allowed to wander for a while, but they are always subjugated to men at the end - they are never allowed to be subversive for long.

History

Two sets of four. 1st: tragic view of life. 2nd: sacramental nature of kingship asserted. They do not appear to have been written in any kind of a chronological order.

Late Plays:

Follow pattern of pastoral romances. Gods are more benevolent. Each play ends with the finding of something thought lost. Reconciliation of enemies, qualities of the unlikely. Some of the plays lack the depth and the technical ability that is demonstrated in some of the earlier works.

Common themes; Elizabethan view of world order, conventions in society: e.g. women,. Subversive or rebellious behaviour is contained. The king is seen as having a divine right to rule, and he should stay at the top - failure to do so disturbs the natural order.

Sonnets:

Some say they were written about a young boy, or a player in one of his companies. They can also be interpreted as being written for a woman. Best seen as an exploration of universal questions about time and death, about beauty and integrity, about love, and about poetry itself.