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Shakespeare in School

By Jeanna Greene

Almost without a doubt, Shakespeare is the only author that every Canadian who graduates from high school will have read at

some point in their junior high or high school career. Shakespeare is one of those historical figures who has become larger than life. Like Einstein, Shakespeare is a household name, and his genius is acknowledged by nearly everyone, regardless of whether or not they enjoy reading his work. We all know Shakespeare; we have all studied him in school. But does his prominence in modern culture and in the modern school system mean that his work is still accessible today? Not necessarily. In fact, his revered status can become a barrier in the teaching of his work. Is Shakespeare still relevant? Certainly. But creative strategies may be necessary to make his relevance apparent to 21st Century teenagers.

Sometimes the build up is a problem. Most children are aware of the genius of Shakespeare long before they first crack open one of his plays. This can lead to frustration if his words do not immediately resonate with the reader as they had been led to expect. In her book of collected essays, *Reimagining Shakespeare*, Naomi J. Miller (2003) points out, “of all the new audiences for Shakespeare, children and young adults are the most likely to be misdirected or even disappointed by their initial encounters with the Bard” (p. 2). His language takes work for modern readers, and the first taste of his

words does not always leave an ill-prepared reader wanting to come back for more.

In an essay on how to make Shakespeare appealing to young people, Tiffany A. Conroy gives four primary reasons that Shakespeare, as he is taught in schools, is not always a hit with the students. First, she points to the tendency of teachers to approach Shakespeare's plays primarily, or even exclusively, as textual works: "the middle school and high school presentation of Shakespeare is largely limited to the page. Few students ever get the chance to read scenes aloud, let alone actually participate in the production of a Shakespeare play" (2003, p. 239). Second, she argues that most of the time the plays that are taught are the tragedies and the histories, which may not be the most likely to entertain teenagers. As well, the 16th century language can be difficult for modern teens to understand. Finally, Conroy (2003) argues that students are not always given enough context – "they know very little if anything about Elizabethan culture, theatre, or Shakespeare's life" (p. 239).

Shakespeare's reputation can also be a problem. It is possible for an author to rise so high that they become well nigh untouchable. To really enjoy Shakespeare,

students need to be able to dive into his plays as living works, not exalted tomes. Caroline McManus (2003) wonders, "In our own appreciation of the plays, do we inadvertently teach our students to mouth rote words of adulation?" (p. 260). Presenting William Shakespeare – playwright, inventor of words, human being – as Shakespeare, god of the English language, is unfair to his works. Shakespeare's plays are right down in the trenches of humanity, but because of his un-contemporariness, and his iconic status, "Shakespeare is not perceived to be part of mainstream . . . culture, but rather an icon of the highbrow elite" (McManus, 2003, p. 260).

Shakespeare, despite his intimidating status and his use of archaic words and phrases, has something to offer anyone. Speaking of classics more generally, young adult author Janet McDonald (2005) argues, "these works have endured through centuries for a reason – they capture the human experience at its essence and thus withstand time and transcend race" (p. 749). This is certainly true of Shakespeare. His language and his settings may be from another time, but his characters are wonderfully human, and human nature does not change. Shakespeare's insights into what makes

people tick are still enlightening; the fun he pokes at the more ridiculous sides of human nature is still laugh-out-loud funny if one takes the time to become familiar with the language, or sees the plays translated by intonation and emphasis upon the stage.

Public libraries can play a role in supplementing teens' experience of Shakespeare. Through Shakespeare-themed programs and a range of appealing and informative resources – print, electronic, fiction, and nonfiction – libraries can help teens become more comfortable with and more immersed in the works of a writer who truly deserves his (sometimes problematic) reputation as one of the most gifted wordsmiths of all time.

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A Well-Rounded Collection

By Jeanna Greene



It is crucial that both public and school libraries have a well-stocked collection of Shakespeare-related resources for teens. A comprehensive collection provides