



Teaching Shakespeare's Greatest Plays & Sonnets with Dr. Joshua Avery

Lecture 1: Introductory Lecture

Outline:

General thoughts about how to approach Shakespeare

- Shakespeare is universally said to be great, but often people wonder why this is thought.
- We do not want to send the message that the meaning of the text is tied to the particular province of some technocratic expert. You don't have to have a secret code to read the text.
- Socrates, in one of his dialogues, wants to know the meaning of the Cosmos (the why). To get meaning, we have to get outside of mechanics.
- To put things in historical context is not bad, but we want to avoid being reductionistic. We want to make sure that that the historical context is illuminating in bringing out meaning.

What is the time period for Shakespeare?

- Shakespeare is in the Renaissance, which means rebirth.
- There was an attempt to revive ancient wisdom.
- This is the beginning of modernity.
- Every age has its own ideas. Ideas matter very much to the people there.
 - What is true?
 - What is good?
 - What is right?
 - What is a proper politic?
- The Middle Ages had a notion of the great chain of being.
 - The order of all things is determined by God.
 - There is a kind of genuine hierarchy.
 - In the early modern period this begins to break down.
 - The notion of natures: For the Medievals it was assumed that things have natures. They have a meaning which can be intelligibly grasped, which can be known. The nature can be accessed by our intellects. This begins to be questioned.
 - Is a human being objective? Is a human being a label that can be redefined and determined based on our own ideas or will? This question moves us in a more modern direction.
- This takes us toward many of the fascinating tensions, ambiguities, and ironies of Shakespeare's texts.



- What does this mean for the early modern period?
 - This brings about a lot of anxiety.
 - Christendom is being splintered by the Reformation, but also by the rise of skepticism, people who reject religion at all.
 - What are we? What does all this mean?
 - This is also exciting. Maybe we can be more assertive, and we can reshape things. We may be able to make a new world of our own.
 - Passivity is gone. Possibility is here.
 - If truth is something we are constructing, we can make ourselves too.
 - Role-playing in poetry and theater becomes a fantastic analogy, metanarrative for what is going on intellectually.
 - How does this make Shakespeare great?
 - It is programmatic restraint. It is an unwillingness to reduce anything to simplicity and to extend beyond what is legitimately known.
 - Shakespeare is fine with mysteries in the Cosmos.
 - Shakespeare doesn't try to have all of the answers.
- What do you tell your students about this?
 - The end of a platonic dialogue doesn't end with the answer to the question usually.
 - Shakespeare is not an ideologue.
 - You are brought into irony (tension) so that you are forced to consider competing options.
 - The most powerful classroom discussion is when the teacher doesn't give a judgement about the best answer.
- Part of the greatness of Shakespeare's artistry is that he puts you into a state of tension.
 - You have competing arguments.
 - You have a genuine mystery.
 - You are asked to work toward it yourself.
 - Everyone knows that things are changing (the West is changing). Shakespeare takes all of that cultural tension and with brilliance maximizing its potential.
 - He derived most of his plots from other sources. Some of the reworking of the plots are very interesting and part of his genius. People don't look to this as the main thing.
 - Medievals are focused outward. Moderns are fixated on inwardness. The fascination with the psyche is part of the fascination with subjectivity.
 - His characters are never generic. They characters sound like no one else. Shakespeare portrays wildly different people, and all convincingly. How is it that the characters are so interesting to us?
 - Shakespeare's mastery of language itself is a part of Shakespeare's greatness.



- Shakespeare also expands the vocabulary of the English vocabulary. He helps shape the history of the English language. He is a constructor of language. The language is the brilliance.
- Sample exercise: Have students pick out a line or two from his poetry. Have the student write a paraphrase. Consider what wonderful things are now lost (rhyme, alliteration, consonance...). Consider rhythm. Get them to see you cannot simply translate it without losing the heart of what is going on.