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"Assessing Shakespeare's Artistic Shortcomings: Dr. Samuel Johnson's Critique in His Preface to Shakespeare"

Ishtiaq Muhammad

MPhil, Lecturer, Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology, Kohat.
Email: ishtiaqrahii42@gmail.com

Zulfiqar Ali

Mphil, Graduate from the department of English, Kohat University of Science and technology, Kohat. Email: zulfiktk524@gmail.com

Muhammad Murtaza

Mphil. Graduate from the Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology, Kohat. Email: muhammadmurtaza4222@gmail.com

Ms. Somaila Shahid

MS, Lecturer, Department of English, Government Polytechnic Institute for Women, Peshawar. Email: somailashahid@gmail.com

Abstract

In his Preface to Shakespeare, Dr. Samuel Johnson presented the most vital critical viewpoint about William Shakespeare's works. Johnson admired Shakespeare's literary talent but had to critique some artistic flaws which included conflicting character development along with unclarified moral perspectives along with his disregard of classical unities and excessive word usage. The article will now examine the complete analysis of Johnson's observations regarding Shakespearean drama with a focus on both his shared perspectives and divergent views with current critics. The study employs a qualitative research methodology, incorporating textual analysis, comparative literary evaluation, and historical contextualization. Research demonstrates that Johnson's observations about the texts function both in literary analysis and Shakespearean studies to develop academic understanding. The research starts by reading Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare for detecting his specific criticisms while monitoring these alongside both Shakespearean plays and modern criticism. The analysis concludes by

demonstrating how Johnson applied Enlightenment principles when evaluating Shakespeare's works during the 18th century framework. This research combines secondary and critical research to establish how Johnson's findings matter to modern Shakespearean scholarship while also recognizing that his final assessments might not hold up in contemporary discourse.

Keywords: Johnson, Shakespeare, literary criticism, characterization, moral ambiguity

Introduction

William Shakespeare maintains his position as an iconic playwright in English literature through his impact on theater and literature as well as arts practices lasting several centuries because his plays feature complex characters and deep language use combined with universal themes. His widespread recognition brings forth a deep analyzing tradition that focuses on both his creative choices and his portrayal of themes along with character growth. From the start of his literary career these dialogues have persisted to analyze both his works and their historical settings (Shakespeare, 2016). Western literary canon considers Shakespeare's works as valuable because they feature profound language and detailed characters while expressing essential human concepts. Critical analysis of his artistic choices and thematic portrayals and character creation has consistently evolved as part of a critical tradition. From the moment of his literary debut until today these critical assessments have continued persisting to offer valuable analytical insights about the produced texts and their cultural context (Bernard, 2013).

During the 18th century Samuel Johnson maintained the leading position among Shakespeare scholars when he wrote his critical review of the playwright's work in his Preface to Shakespeare (1765). Johnson praised Shakespeare's deep knowledge of human nature while acknowledging his failed artistic elements in his works. Johnson delivered a balanced literary assessment of Shakespeare

through his criticism by promoting his talents while presenting both his abilities and shortcomings (Willbern, 2016).

The research investigates Dr. Samuel Johnson's assessment of Shakespearean works while analyzing character development and unclear moral values as well as plot organization. The paper investigates what makes Johnson's literary analysis fundamental to present-day Shakespearean criticism. The critical analysis by Johnson causes academics and theater enthusiasts to consider which apparent artistic flaws turned Shakespeare's productions into better and more appealing works. Throughout the study these analyses of Shakespeare's works by Johnson will be placed within the broader sphere of literary scholarship. Literary works continue to shape modern debates about literary methodology together with moral issues and artistic development practice. Through its investigation the study highlights the worth of criticism in literary excellence research and establishes new perspectives on Shakespeare's artistic contributions (Rendall, Smith, Parsons, Fairbanks, Stelzer, Bell, Baratta, 2022).

Dr. Samuel Johnson's Perspective on Shakespeare

During the 18th century Dr. Samuel Johnson earned recognition for his authoritative position as a literary critic who delivered deep analysis of both language and literature. Through his work as a lexicographer he completed *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) which created new standards for English language dictionary-making. His ability to carefully analyze texts together with his exceptional understanding of arts made him a leading critic who evaluated Shakespeare's literary works.

Through his analysis in the Preface to Shakespeare Dr. Samuel Johnson explains his assessment through Enlightenment doctrines which focus on moral values along with proper behavior and logical reasoning. His comments about Shakespeare which mirrored the literary requirements of his time hold practical value for contemporary discussions about art and its essential nature. Johnson

devotes most of his analysis to examine the aspects of Shakespeare's characterization along with his uncertain morality and structural prowess and his distinct stylistic approach.

During his Preface to Shakespeare (1765) publication Johnson composed an evaluative exposition by stating positive points together with negative ones. The playwright won praise from Johnson because he portrayed emotions naturally while addressing eternal themes and displaying knowledge about human behaviors. Johnson emerged as different from traditional neoclassical critics who judged Shakespeare for his non-compliance with classical rules because he saw clear merits in the playwright's work. At the same time as recognizing Shakespeare's artistic shortcomings Johnson acknowledged the playwright's talent through observations of inadequate moral teachings and violation of dramatic rules and confusions in character portrayal and verbalism excesses.

According to Johnson the criticism he gave carried neither cruelty nor disrespect because he acknowledged all writers possess flaws. Through his Preface to Shakespeare Johnson united an appreciation of Shakespearean genius with analytical examination of his weaknesses creating a timeless piece of literary study according to Tomarken (2009).

Characterization

According to Johnson Shakespeare created believable characters that attract readers from every time period and place. The writer specified multiple disadvantages to his analysis alongside his praise. According to Johnson Shakespeare's lead characters Macbeth and Hamlet possess deep psychological depth yet multiple supporting figures serve only for plot advancement without developing personality. The Tempest reveals Gonzalo along with other characters who operate primarily as moral guides over developing into complete individuals. According to Johnson the comedic interjections Shakespeare included such as Hamlet's gravediggers disrupted the emotional power of the dramatic scenes.

Johnson acknowledged these theatrical conventions of Shakespeare's time confirmed his excellence rather than implying any deficiency since they were standard practices for stage performances (Johnson 2009).

Moral Ambiguity

The contended element in Johnson's analysis pertains to his criticism against Shakespeare's ambiguous ethical communication in his works. Johnson followed the neoclassical belief that art needed to educate as well as amuse through his view that literature needed to teach moral values. The author accused Shakespeare of neglecting to provide explicit moral lessons through unclear depictions of the results produced by characters in his plays. Neither Macbeth nor its main character has a straightforward ethical lesson indicating that the audience must interpret various dimensions of fate, ambition and free choice from the tragic ending. The destructive force of envy in Othello is studied but the play abstains from illustrating an ethical system to evaluate this impact. Johnson asserts that modern critics identify the play's ambiguous aspects as a probable sign of stunning power which demonstrates human life's complexities (Poplawski, 2022).

Structural Integrity

Through his complaints about Shakespeare's disregard for the traditional unities Johnson displays his main objection to Shakespeare's design system. The established literary requirements from the 18th century based on Aristotle's Poetics demanded strict structure to maintain realistic appearance in artistic works as shown in this analysis. Shakespeare presented his story across Rome and Egypt throughout his plays including Antony and Cleopatra which spanned historical periods and geographical areas. According to Johnson's view these structural freedoms damaged audience connection while damaging the drama's sense of unity. Despite these structural defects Shakespeare salvaged them with his exceptional storytelling ability according to Brandão (2022, January 15).

Stylistic Tendencies

Johnson criticized the extensive rhetorical techniques alongside verbal playfulness that Shakespeare employed in his works. Although Shakespeare's command of language was shown through these artistic choices Johnson argued that they sometimes work against the narrative and lower dramatic impact. The abundance of puns and elaborate vocabulary in *Love's Labor's Lost* by Shakespeare creates problems with the flow of the story which makes the play more challenging to comprehend. Johnson saw this as a sign that Shakespeare used his linguistic talents beyond control in order to prioritize tricks over understanding (Xiu-fang, 2020).

Implications of Johnson's Critiques

Dr. Johnson bases his discussion on prevailing literary rules from his time period yet his Shakespeare assessment offers eternal insights about the playwright's writing principles. Plutarch's study examines the conflict that occurs when classical aesthetics meet Shakespeare's inventive storytelling (Johnson & Cesario, 2019).

The Value of Flaws

The strong criticism presented by Johnson shows that Shakespeare required his missteps to develop his works. The deficiencies in his work create deeper layers alongside enhanced thematic complexity which enables audience members to develop critical examinations of them. The morally ambiguous approach Shakespeare presents functions as an invitation to his readers to find solutions to ethical dilemmas so they understand human nature better.

Historical Context and Artistic Innovation

The strong criticism presented by Johnson shows that Shakespeare required his missteps to develop his works. The deficiencies in his work create deeper layers alongside enhanced thematic complexity which enables audience members to develop critical examinations of them. The morally ambiguous approach

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Modern Relevance

The tools from these criticisms still offer educational value for Shakespearean research but they have decreased in usage among modern scholars. The method provides you with essential insights into the flaws and achievements of the writer. The method enables researchers to create a deeper understanding of Shakespeare the creator because of his multiple contradictions and complex works which maintain contemporary significance. Dr. Samuel Johnson created a landmark work with *The Preface to Shakespeare* that accurately blended critical assessments with positive evaluations. A complete understanding of Shakespeare's theatrical works becomes possible when we analyze the playwright's character illustration along with his ethical complexity and structural organization and stylistic techniques. The criticisms presented by Johnson create today's readers a motivation to analyze Shakespeare with reverence and analytical rigor. Through this dual voice approach the critique's value in literary greatness research becomes restated again thus allowing readers to understand Shakespeare's artistic mastery more clearly. The imperfections of revered artists stand only as colloidal components that produce better outcomes and Johnson uses his work to demonstrate this fact. A critical examination of Johnson's scholarly methods demonstrates how his thoughts remain significant for present-day interpretations about Shakespeare's enduring literary value.

Literature Review

Dr. Samuel Johnson's Critical Legacy

The Preface to Shakespeare by Johnson stands as a historical monument in the field of literary studies. The literary scholars T.S. Eliot (1932) and Harold Bloom (1998) recognized how well Johnson understood Shakespeare's both strengths and weaknesses. According to Kernan (1995) Johnson established the influential

principle that Shakespeare accurately portrayed universal human nature in his work. Later critics have evaluated Johnson's persistent criticisms against Shakespeare for lacking moral direction and coherent structure because these neoclassical standards were overemphasized. (Boulton, 2002)

Moral Purpose in Shakespeare's Plays

Johnson found fault with Shakespeare for not teaching a moral lesson worn his feelings and for rewarding the vice rather than the virtue so often. Later critics such as A.C. Bradley (1904) answered this argument by arguing that Shakespeare's realist psychological depth did make it difficult clearly to determine simple moral judgments. Meanwhile, more recent scholars, such as Emma Smith (2019), have claimed that Shakespeare's plays do indeed portray the ethics of human beings rather than speaking of 'fixed ethical lessons.' (Gray, 2023)

The Unities: Classical vs. Shakespearean Drama

According to critics from the 18th century Shakespeare failed to use the classical unities of time, place and action as taught by Aristotle which received Johnson's current endorsement. Although Johnson shared the same position as other neoclassical critics regarding Shakespeare's flawed structure he acknowledged the captivating character portrayals and compelling plotlines in his works (Kermode, 2000). Modern critic Jonathan Bate (2008) and other scholars like him endorse Shakespeare's dramatic flexibility as a significant reason behind his enduring audience popularity. (Gray, 2023)

Characterization and Psychological Depth

Johnson's main objection to Shakespeare's was what he regarded his occasional lack of consistency in character development. His praise for Shakespeare, however, was for the creation of timeless, relatable men and women, while though he pointed out that sometimes characters did things diametrically opposite to their established traits. However, later critics (including Harold Bloom 1998) claim that these inconsistencies are symptomatic of Shakespeare's developing narrative

technique rather than a flaw. Rather, they contend that Shakespeare's characters are psychologically complex rather than psychologically rigid. (Watkins, 2003)

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Dr. Samuel Johnson, in his Preface to Shakespeare, acknowledges Shakespeare's literary brilliance but critiques his artistic shortcomings, particularly his disregard for unity of action, time, and place. He argues that Shakespeare often sacrifices coherence for dramatic appeal, a concern relevant to discussions on structural inconsistencies in linguistic analysis (Ishtiaq et al., 2022). Moreover, Johnson criticizes Shakespeare's imprecise language and occasional neglect of grammatical precision, issues that parallel modern concerns about punctuation errors in writing (Ali et al., 2020). Critical discourse analysis offers an approach to analyze how Shakespeare failed to practice poetic justice in a similar manner to digital discourse investigations of literature gender representation studies (Gill et al., 2025; Ishtiaq et al., 2021). Johnson's evaluation of Shakespeare's characterization deficits forms a strong connection with research that compares character development approaches in classical Arabic and English literary works (Ali et al., 2018). Johnson's analysis of Shakespeare's dialogue weaknesses matches the dialogue research principles studied in conversation analysis which evaluates verbal and nonverbal indicators (Ali et al., 2019). The structural research of literary texts disclosed in Ishtiaq et al., 2022 confirms Johnson's observations regarding inconsistencies in Shakespeare's works. Johnson's comments correspond

to studies dedicated to transliteration and pronunciation mistakes in English thus extending their linguistic significance (Ishtiaq et al., 2022). His analysis of Shakespeare's ethical complexities connects to mainstream discussions about different populations' interpretation of words and messages (Ali et al., 2020).

Research on poetic styles verifies Johnson's assessment that Shakespeare periodically showed lapses in his writing style (Majid, 2019). The research about disagreement strategies in intercultural communication by Ishtiaq et al. (2022) offers valuable insights into argumentative dialogues within Shakespeare's plays. Analyzing Shakespeare's sociopolitical elements requires studying his work through established methodologies researchers use to analyze literary texts (Gill et al., 2025). Johnson's criticism exists within the context of syntactic language analysis through the application of X-bar theory research developed by Chomsky (Ishtiaq & Gill, 2024). The way Shakespeare constructs his language corresponds to educational studies on linguistic element representations by Majid et al. along with research on semantic density and lexical choices in religious and literary texts according to Ishtiaq et al. (2021). The perspectives presented by Johnson continue to be important within modern linguistic and literary academic research.

In his assessment of Shakespeare's artistic estimate, Dr. Samuel Johnson stresses Shakespeare's violation of classical unities and his problematic development of plots. Johnson admits that Shakespeare's remarkable ability to portray human feelings surpasses every shortcoming that his plays contain. Literary scholars suggest human character examination in literature established by Shakespeare becomes independent of traditional literary rules. Ali et al. (2016) analyze social class conflict across literature while demonstrating how Shakespeare depicted societal ranking and personal hardships. Ullah et al. (2017) embark on a study of literary exploitation that aligns with Shakespeare's portrayal of power-struggles between characters.

Archetypal heroes constitute major characters found in Shakespearean plays while appearing as a central concept in classical literature according to Ali and Akhtar (2018) in their analysis of storytelling archetypes. With the help of such concepts, researchers establish methods and means to understand Shakespeare's artistic decisions by putting his works within the broader traditions of literature. The analysis of Shakespeare's language techniques and educational elements in his works by Johnson follows the evaluation of Ali et al. (2020) about how literature courses affect modern perceptions of literary structure.

Johnson points out Shakespeare's flawed artistic elements such as inconsistent character development and plot design but Saeed et al. (2020) explains these flaws originate from cultural representations of female characters in classical literature demonstrated by Shakespeare's complex depictions of women. The additional viewpoints established them as valuable tools for understanding Shakespeare's artistic techniques which go beyond what Johnson recognizes. Author Ali and Ali (2022) demonstrate how the Qur'anic basis for teaching stands as an alternative approach to Shakespeare's educational methods in literature.

Shakespeare's Language: Strength or Weakness?

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Methodology

The research uses qualitative methods to analyze Dr. Samuel Johnson's evaluation of Shakespeare's artistic defects through historical textual examination. This study follows specific key procedures.

Textual Analysis of Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare

A close reading of Johnson's Preface to Shakespeare (1765) to extract specific criticisms of Shakespeare's works by Johnson and to identify his main arguments as to Shakespeare's artistic flaws, namely moral ambiguity, structural inconsistencies, and wordiness.

Comparative Literary Analysis

By comparison of Johnson's critiques with other contemporary and modern evaluations of Shakespeare's works. Application of Shakespearean plays as textual examples for showing Johnson's points.

Historical Contextualization

Consideration of 18th-century literary norms and critical expectations. A study of how neoclassical principles of moral teaching combined with structural organization and institutional integrity shaped Johnson's views.

Secondary Source Review

Through the review of scholarly articles, books and other critical essays that focused on Johnson's criticism on literary criticism itself. Integration of such perspectives as have been taken by other literary critics who discuss the strengths and weaknesses of Shakespeare.

Discussion

The historical aspects and their effect appear within Johnson's Preface where he evaluates Shakespeare through criticism and simultaneously targets widespread misinterpretations about him. Johnson's evaluation of Shakespeare's work shows that the playwright suffers from structural deficiencies while creating exceptional emotional connections and lively characters. In his discussion Hunter explains

how Shakespeare handles complicated storytelling through his creation of complex morally driven characters and complex narrative structures. The commentary demonstrates to audiences and readers the process of understanding historical moral conflicts through contemporary examples that allow them to mentally experience those storylines. Moral Complexity functions as one key topic of interest for Johnson within Shakespeare's characterization methods. The evaluation by Jackson supports this interpretation through evidence that Shakespeare and Johnson combined create a comprehensive understanding of human nature applicable to modern audiences. Shakespeare's management of traditional dramatic conventions has developed from the discussions which began with Johnson's evaluations of Shakespeare's structural alterations in his work. Since Tillyard considered these alterations to be creative improvements in theater presentations he chose to describe them positively even though they did not indicate structural weaknesses in theatrical production. The Preface by Johnson functions today as a piece that both commends literary works and offers assessment of them to modern scholars. Today Research today looks beyond Johnson's work because it tries to study Shakespeare's individual components and their significance for the existing literary studies discussions.

The Introductory section that Samuel Johnson wrote to Shakespeare bridges historic literary analysis with the more contemporary approaches. The analysis evaluates structural details together with narrative techniques and moral tones while providing specific research directions according to Johnson. The combination of admiration and criticism in his evaluation allows experts to create useful interpretations of Shakespeare's dramatic works while proving their relevance to modern cultural expressions. The assessments made by Johnson function as critical benchmarks to help scholars understand Shakespeare's everlasting nature as described by contemporary critics including Bloom and Jackson and Tillyard plus additional authors.

Conclusion

Dr. Samuel Johnson examines Shakespeare's work with fairness in his Preface to Shakespeare and expresses homage toward both author and work. Shakespeare earned Johnson's deepest respect for understanding human nature but he noticed problems with inconsistent character development and weak characterizations as well as flaws in moral directions and structural unevenness along with excessive poetics throughout his work. From his point of view the Enlightenment moral principles for literature combined with neat structure and classical rule following earn negative evaluation. Johnson acknowledged Shakespeare's plays to be timeless masterpieces even though he criticized specific aspects that led to their creation of deep theatrical depth. With the help of his approach to deep morals and dynamic creative methods Shakespeare made literature immune to strict constraints so that modern scholars can continue their debates across generations. The assessment written by Johnson serves today's scholars with foundational elements to understand Shakespearean texts. The evaluation from Johnson provides intellectual foundations which guide today's academic examinations about dramatic structure development while advancing character studies and literary moral study. Research has proved the validity of Johnson's belief that literary excellence makes progress through a combination of praise and constructive evaluation. Johnson's arguments explored by students provide readers and scholars a better understanding of Shakespeare.

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