

Preface to Shakespeare Summary

Writer: Samuel Johnson | Generated: Jan 26, 2026

Shakespeare's Enduring Fame and Universal Appeal: Samuel Johnson begins his preface by saying that great writers are admired most after their death, when people can read their works without personal bias. He says that Shakespeare has passed the test of time. People have been reading his plays for more than a hundred years and continue to enjoy them. According to Johnson, only those works last long which truly reflect human nature. Shakespeare's plays do this very well. His characters and situations are not limited to any particular time, place, or culture. They are based on general human life. This is why people from all places and all times can understand and enjoy his plays. Johnson calls him "the poet of nature." It means he writes about real people and real emotions, rather than imaginary or idealized figures.

Shakespeare's Realistic Characters and Dialogues: Johnson says that Shakespeare's greatest strength is his creation of natural characters. His characters are not shaped by special jobs, local customs, or temporary trends. They are based on common human emotions and behaviors that are true in all ages. While many poets create characters who seem unreal or exaggerated, Shakespeare's characters are like ordinary people. Johnson says they represent "a species" rather than "an individual." This means they reflect the types of people we meet in daily life. His dialogues also sound very natural. Shakespeare does not use artificial or bookish language. He makes his characters speak like real people, using words that match their emotions and situations.

His Strength in Comedy over Tragedy: According to Johnson, Shakespeare was born to write comedy. He says that in comic scenes, Shakespeare writes easily and naturally. The jokes and humorous situations come to him without much effort. His comic characters are lively and full of fun. On the other hand, in tragic scenes, Johnson feels that Shakespeare often works harder but with less success. His tragic speeches are sometimes long, unnatural, or difficult to understand. Johnson even notes that Shakespeare looks for opportunities to add comedy to tragedies, which demonstrates his comfort with comic writing. His tragedies are powerful in terms of action and incidents, but his comedies are better in terms of language and character.

His Blending of Tragedy and Comedy: Johnson defends Shakespeare for mixing comic and tragic elements in the same play. He says that life is not fully happy or fully sad. It is a mix of

both. So a drama that shows both emotions is more natural and realistic. Earlier critics, especially the French ones like Voltaire, said that tragedy and comedy should not be mixed. But Johnson argues that this rule is artificial. He says, "The end of writing is to instruct by pleasing." If a mixed play gives pleasure and teaches lessons, it is successful. Also, people enjoy variety in a play. They do not want to feel only sadness or only laughter. So Shakespeare's style is more true to human experience than the strict rules of classical critics.

His Violation of the Three Unities: Some critics attacked Shakespeare because he did not follow the classical unities of time, place, and action. But Johnson strongly defends him. He says that the unity of action is important, and Shakespeare generally adheres to it. But the unities of time and place are not very useful. According to Johnson, a play is not real life, so we should not expect it to follow the strict rules of real life. The audience knows that a play is fiction. They do not believe they are really in Rome or Alexandria. So if the story changes place or time, it does not break the illusion. Johnson says that Shakespeare focused on telling a complete, engaging story, and that is more important than following rules. He thinks variety is better than strict order, and Shakespeare chose the better way.

His Knowledge of Human Life and Behavior: Johnson praises Shakespeare for his deep understanding of human nature. He says that Shakespeare's plays are full of practical wisdom. His characters behave like real people and exhibit traits that readers can relate to. Johnson says that "his plays are the mirror of life". We can learn about human behavior by reading or watching his plays. Even when Shakespeare writes about kings or supernatural events, he keeps their actions and dialogues close to real life. His plays teach lessons about emotions like love, jealousy, pride, and ambition. Johnson says that from Shakespeare's works, we can make a system of civil and domestic wisdom.

His Faults and Weaknesses: Johnson not only praises Shakespeare, but he also discusses his faults honestly. He says Shakespeare did not write with a clear moral purpose. His plays don't always punish the bad or reward the good. He was more interested in pleasing the audience than teaching them. Johnson also says that some of Shakespeare's plots are weak or loosely organized. Sometimes the end of a play feels hurried or incomplete. He also criticizes Shakespeare for being careless about historical facts and chronology. For example, in some plays, ancient characters discuss events from later times. Johnson also complains that Shakespeare uses low jokes or vulgar puns too often, even in serious moments. These things lower the emotional power of his writing.

Shakespeare's Strong and Weak Language: Johnson says that Shakespeare's language is often beautiful and powerful, but sometimes too pompous or difficult. When he writes naturally,

his language is easy and clear. But when he tries too hard to sound grand, it becomes confusing or boring. Johnson says that Shakespeare's best speeches come from real emotions, not from overthinking or forced imagination. When Shakespeare speaks from the heart, his words are strong. But when he tries to be clever or use too many fancy words, the result is not always good. He often uses quibbles or puns, even in serious scenes. Johnson says that Shakespeare loved wordplay too much, and it often ruined the seriousness of a moment.

Shakespeare's Historical Plays and Sources: Johnson suggests that Shakespeare drew many of his plots from historical books, ballads, and popular stories. His history plays are based on English chronicles, and many tragedies are taken from Roman lives translated into English. These sources were well-known in Shakespeare's time, so his audience already knew the stories. Johnson says Shakespeare added drama and emotion to these stories, which made them more exciting. His audience liked action, spectacle, and complex plots, so Shakespeare gave them that. According to Johnson, Shakespeare made people care about the events and characters, which is why his stories still attract readers.

Shakespeare's Lack of Classical Education: Some critics say that Shakespeare was not well educated. Johnson agrees that Shakespeare had only a little Latin and no Greek, but he says this is not important. Even without the aid of deep learning, Shakespeare possessed a great mind and sharp observational skills. He understood people, their actions, and their emotions better than many educated men. Johnson says that true knowledge comes from life, not just from books. Shakespeare learned from watching the world around him. He may not have been familiar with the classical rules, but he created a new and unique English drama. Johnson says we should not judge him by what he did not know, but by what he did.

Shakespeare's Originality and Contribution to English Drama: Johnson believes that Shakespeare created a new kind of English drama. Before him, there were no plays with strong characters and natural dialogue. Shakespeare was the first to make drama both entertaining and realistic. He did not follow the style of earlier writers but created his own path. His plays are characterized by variety, imagination, and keen observation. Johnson says Shakespeare invented new types of characters, situations, and language, and later writers copied him. He also helped to shape the English language itself. Johnson says Shakespeare showed what English poetry and drama could become.

Final Evaluation of Shakespeare's Greatness: In the last part of the preface, Johnson gives a balanced judgment. He says Shakespeare is not perfect, but his strengths are greater than his weaknesses. His plays are not always polished or moral, but they are full of life, energy, and truth. He may not always follow the rules, but he follows nature. Johnson says that no one can read or see Shakespeare's plays without feeling genuine emotions, such as

laughter, sorrow, fear, and joy. He concludes by saying that even though Shakespeare did not consider future fame, his works have made him immortal. People may forget other writers, but Shakespeare will always be remembered.

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