SHAKESPEARIAN CRITICISM: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE NEW CRITICS AND THEIR PREDECESSORS A.C. BRADLEY AND E.E., STOLL

AN ABSTRACT

There have been varieties of critical approaches to Shakespeare’s work after his death. This has by now acquired the dimension of an independent field of study and research. In the last hundred years or so, the mass of Shakespearean studies of every kind has been so vast, that no single scholar can now hope to keep abreast of everything that is written about Shakespeare. Yet there are fashions in literary criticism which follow the general changes in taste and in other artistic matters. Four approaches to Shakespeare's study are especially popular. These are the following: the textual interpretations of Shakespeare, based on authenticity of research and sources; the impressionistic criticism, related to A.C. Bradley; the historical and intellectual study of Shakespeare based on the Elizabethan theatre and the background; then the poetic school of thoughts or the ‘New Critics’, interpretative criticism of the minute analysis of Shakespeare’s use of symbol and imagery. An attempt has been made to consider these important critics of Shakespeare; A.C. Bradley, E.E., Stoll and the ‘New Critic’s’. The number and variety of minds at work in order to interpret and analyze the fascinating work of this supreme artist: Shakespeare, is really amazing and at times bewildering.

Chapter I of this work endeavours to throw light on the various critical commentaries and criticism that was recorded after Shakespeare’s death till the present times. During the 17th 18th century, Shakespeare was both admired and condemned. There was a lot of adverse criticism regarding Shakespeare
because he did not follow the rules of the three unites, that was the prevalent custom among the Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights. However, these adverse criticism regarding Shakespeare did not last long, though certain issues regarding his education, authentic and unauthentic work have continued to interest critics. The early criticism was mostly charges against his moral propriety made by Samuel Johnson in the 18th century and by George Bernard Shaw in the 20th century. Although Johnson defended Shakespeare on the question of the classical rules and generated interest in Shakespeare’s characters when he argued that no one considers the stage play to be real life, this reached its culmination in the late 19th century with the work of A.C. Bradley. The predecessors of Bradley have been highlighted with the purpose of projecting that Bradley was under the sure impact of these romantic critics, who wanted to read the plays of Shakespeare like a novel.

They enquired into the lives of Shakespeare’s characters as if they were real men and women, over-interpretation was one kind of excess which has provoked a wholesale rejection of Bradley and the nineteenth century naturalistic approach.

These opponent critics of Bradley argued that plot rather than character was Shakespeare’s primary concern. Among them E.E. Stoll was the most vociferous, he tries to show that the attempts made by previous critics to demonstrate the consistency of Shakespeare’s characters have only led them to indulge in absurdity. According to Stoll Shakespeare is a great ‘artificer’ who through his skill of craftsmanship makes us believe in impossible situation, that he achieves this great effects from projecting the contrast between the hero and his actions-between the nobility of Macbeth and his career of crime, between
the noble Othello and his jealous man. That Shakespeare’s plays obeyed certain Elizabethan conventions and traditions that could not be overlooked. The inconsistencies that have been noted by the character analysts would not be noticed when the plays were being performed as the audience does not have the time to think and ponder like a reader has. Shakespeare’s, poetic dramas did not present, the characters ‘true to life’ but thrived by creating an illusion of reality. It goes to the credit of Stoll for providing an antidote to William Archer’s ‘The Old Drama and the New, in which he makes scathing attack on Elizabethan poetic drama. Archer praises lavishly the contemporary well made plays of the twentieth century which he projected as much more superior to the poetic drama of the Elizabethan times. In fact Stoll thinks it to be the greatness of Shakespeare as a dramatic poet to have manipulated and maneuvered and wriggled himself out of so many difficult situation and yet, kept his audiences enthralled, captivated having entertained them to the maximum. Then came the upsurge of the third great approach, in the world of Shakespeare’s cosmic vision, with a keen interest in the imagery and symbol of his plays. This new movement became conspicuous in the 1930’s and is still quite in demand. This approach was greatly stimulated by the work of sigmoid Freud, which led to the reconsideration of the nature of language itself and of the principles of criticism. It was natural that the New Critics should re-examine Shakespeare’s poetic language and his uses of poetic imagery. The illustration of this approach was mainly seen in the works of Caroline Spurgeon in Shakespeare’s Imagery and what it Tells us (1935) and also in G. Wilson Knight’s The Wheel of Fire (1930) and some other works. By many eminent scholars this approach is merely considered as a reaction to the earlier methods of character exaltation and also a refutation of the historical criticism of Shakespeare. This chapter
mainly examines these major trends and the basic issues involved. However, the work of research is a continuous process, but the enjoyment of Shakespeare's work can never be hampered, no matter how deep Shakespeare seems engulfed by these conflicting criticism and scholarship. The second chapter of this study has examined Hamlet as a specimen so that the contribution made in this regard by Bradley, Stoll and the New Critics can be evaluated. Hamlet is that play of Shakespeare that has been most written about, every great critic even of the stature of Voltaire and Dryden from the ancient times and T.S. Eliot and Spurgeon from the modern times have, written about Hamlet. Hamlet is that play of Shakespeare that still remains an enigma.

Bradley, it is certain had a definite purpose in writing out the character analysis of Hamlet and there is sure reflection of the 19th century Romantic criticism. The most important problem for him in the play was the delay. According to Bradley, Hamlet had failed to carry out his duty and that was a great lapse on his part. He presents many external difficulties that prevented Hamlet from taking revenge and then shrugs all of them away. Then later on Bradley becomes sure the delay was due to some interval problem that was in Hamlet's mind and he was surely afflicted by melancholy. All this causes Bradley to indulge in intense speculation and analysis. Proceeding on this vein Hamlet is projected as a person weak of will and in a daze. Every inconsistency that he finds in the entire play is explained according to this hypothesis. Bradley wants his readers to view Shakespeare according to the analysis that he presents. But this kind of anachronistic judgement is not acceptable to Stoll. He claims instead, Hamlet was not a weak hero and there, was no question of a delay in the play of Hamlet. Shakespeare in postponing the main action was just following tradition, that came from the Greeks, 'an epical tradition'.
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Shakespeare was not only adhering to the popular demands of the theatre goers of his plays but also gratifying the "dramatic-requirements, of the ghost that by all means must appear at the beginning, and the tragic deed to be accomplished, as in all good revenge plays, ancient or modern at the end" (Stoll, Art and Artifice, p.91) Stoll tries to answer all of these critics who have presented Hamlet as a problem play. He insisted that great comedy is rooted in farce and great tragedy is rooted in melodrama. Stoll's greatness lies in the fact that he emphasises the element of clever designing in Hamlet and other great Shakespearean tragedies. Thus, according to Stoll's outlook, Hamlet is a great poetic play where the element of verisimilitude is deliberately neglected for the sake of effects that was peculiar to great heroic tragedy during Shakespeare's time.

Besides the interpretation of Bradley and Stoll there is a recent illustration of Hamlet, that reflects in the work of G.W. Knight's. His method is very different from the two mentioned already. Knight has a unique interest in the imagery and symbol at play in the world of Hamlet. As an interpreter of Hamlet, Knight does not show any concern regarding the delay in Hamlet neither is he interested in Hamlet being a play written in the Elizabethan background, he is mostly engaged with the nature of Hamlet's suffering. To fully understand his brand of interpretation it is necessary to comprehend the poetics he has propounded regarding the nature of Shakespearean drama in his book, the Wheel of Fire, (1930) . He projects a 'pale' faced Hamlet the very symbol of death and decay, he is the only disturbing factor placed in an otherwise healthy and prosperous background of the kingdom. Claudius is granted a clean image by Knight's and becomes an epitome of health and life for this interpreter of images. And in reverse Hamlet becomes the cause of all
that goes wrong in the other characters life. Thus according to Knight’s, modern instinct, ‘Hamlet is an element of evil in the state of Denmark’. The main theme according to Knight is that of death and a clash between good and evil, health and disease. Knight reverses the tragedy of Hamlet absolutely, if he had written this play, Hamlet would have been the villain and Claudius the victim.

The chapter third of this study is an attempt to redefine Bradley according to twenty first century perspective. Of course it is not possible to forget the massive critical assault that Bradley’s ‘Shakespearean tragedy was subjected to, but these twentieth century critics were in fact rejecting the long-established point of view that character should be the dominant interest of the Shakespeare criticism. However, Bradley’s, ‘Shakespearean Tragedy’ has survived two major assaults and is still a very powerful book to reckon with. Further Bradley in his own orb could be said to be an original thinker. Bradley as a critic of Shakespeare has propounded a poetics regarding the substance of ‘Shakespearean tragedy’ which is yet to be replaced. Bradley not only marks the culmination of the romantic 19th century character analysis, he also suggested that the plays had unifying imagistic atmospheres, an idea that was further developed in the 20th century.

The fourth chapter examines Stoll’s approach to Shakespeare’s drama. It has been customary of his contemporaries and his critics to discard his doctrine and study of Shakespearian plays as a ‘realist’ reaction and Stoll as a opponent of impressionism in Shakespearean criticism. Because he has often insisted that Shakespeare should be interpreted in the Elizabethan context, he has been declared to be in the line of historical critics as different as Robert Bridges and L.L. Schucking. It was Stoll and Schucking who have together presented.
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Shakespeare as an Elizabethan Jacobean play Wright with a very difficult job to perform the entertainment of his audiences at the same time keeping within the confines of the tradition and conventions of his age. These two scholars had the courage to humanize Shakespeare. The myth that Bradley had said the last word regarding Shakespeare and his characters and it was a subject exhausted completely by him. And could no longer be exploited was hence dispelled for ever. Stoll & Schucking in fact together have brought about the turning point in the criticism of Shakespeare and put him back on the stage. Then a new angle of studying Shakespearean plays were also discovered, i.e. the response of the theatre audience and their influence on the work of an artist. Stoll is known to have stressed that Shakespeare along with the other authors of his age should be studied according to the context of their age and then, the evolution of genre also needs to be considered so that the superiority of Shakespeare could be established but comparison of Shakespeare with the other playwrights of his culture and background was inevitable.

Another fact regarding Stoll is amazing that although he presents a new and revolutionary understanding towards Shakespeare, yet somehow he has not been significantly noticed and acclaimed. What could have gone wrong? This chapter attempts, not only to explain Stoll's doctrine but tries to find out the reason that prevented him from making his mark in the world of Shakespeare criticism. The chapter V of this research is the study of the erosion of this particular school of poetic thoughts that was the endeavour of Wilson Knight, L.C. Knight and Caroline Spurgeon, which has a definite place in the history of Shakespeare criticism. The upsurge of this crusade against the character analysers and the historical critics were intense and overpowering, this resulted in the complete rejection of all that was traditional and orthodox and gave place
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to a new phase in the history of Shakespeare criticism that gave prominence to the imagery and symbolism of Shakespeare's language. These 'New Critics' as they were named, it is their tendency to abandon both the study of character and plot. The plays are instead viewed in terms of the unity of image, metaphor and tone. Caroline Spurgeon began the careful classification of Shakespeare's imagery, although her attempts were later visualized as naive and morally biased, but yet her work can never be undermined and is a landmark in Shakespearean criticism. Some other 'New Critics' like G.W. Knight, L.C. Knight have all been discussed and their poetics discussed briefly. Of course this sort of criticism cannot claim to be fool proof, since in interpretative criticism there is danger of the analysis becoming personal and biased.

In the conclusive chapter VI th., the analysis of all the chapters mentioned above are been observed in detail. It is an endeavour of this research to project that Shakespeare can't be studied by obliterating the past. The critic also, were all writing according to the trends of their age and hence their faults were a common error characteristic of the entire age. Bradley may have been writing at the end of the century but he was following the tradition of the romantic school of thoughts strictly, very similar to Morgann, Hazlitt, Coleridge and Dowden. Hence if we view Bradley in this light, an understanding dawns upon us and some of his inconsistencies gets diluted. Regarding the discussion of Hamlet this research reaches a conclusion that no matter how Hamlet is discussed and debated, Hamlet still remains a mystery and that even an unsolved one. Actually it is the victory of the playwright that even after so many centuries have passed, his plays still captivate and interest his readers that is in fact the recognition of a true genius which is conferred upon: William Shakespeare.
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Bradley's book is still very powerful and we cannot do without him and his insight, even today character study still survives in some form or the other.

Stoll could not make a mark in the world of Shakespeare criticism due to two factors, he had tried to humanize Shakespeare and presented him as an artificer and secondly the upsurge of the poetic school or the New Criticism was so strong that Stoll's doctrine could not survive. It is the credit of the New Critics to have decoded Shakespeare’s imagery and symbol as it was desperately needed that Shakespeare should be made accessible to the present time. Hence it is to the credit of these approaches to have given us three different Shakespeare. Bradley and his ancestors gave us a philosophical and a supreme character delineator. Stoll puts Shakespeare back to the theatre and made us conscious of not becoming anachronistic. Further he also compelled us to study the playwright from the angle of audience response and their demand on the dramatist. The New Criticism have brought Shakespeare out of the stage and have granted him of being a superb poet. Each of these approaches is valid and if studied in synthesis only, then can Shakespeare be understood completely. Instead of opposing and refuting each other they should be collaborating and cooperating and cooperating with each other in order to preserve the real Shakespeare.