Unit 1C. READING COMPREHENSION

Immortal words

The sixteenth-century dramatist Ben Jonson generously called his rival, Shakespeare, a writer 'not of an age, but for all time'. And so, it has proved to be, because Shakespeare's plays are still the most translated and most performed of any playwright's in the world. But if you ask people the reason for Shakespeare's continued popularity, you get different answers. Some say he was a great storyteller, others that the magic lies in the beauty of his poetry. Some say it is simply because he left us a huge volume of work, which was written during a vibrant time in English history, particularly in the theatre.

A more interesting answer that I came across recently is one put forward by the critic Harold Bloom in his book Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human. Bloom argues that Shakespeare gave us something that the world had not seen in literature before – characters with personalities, and particularly weaknesses, that we could relate to. These lifelike characters and the observations that Shakespeare made about the human condition are really what Jonson was referring to when he talked about Shakespeare's universal appeal. For Bloom, a lifelong fan of the poet, English speakers have Shakespeare to thank for much of their current language, cultural references and their understanding of human psychology.

While some might disagree with Bloom's assertion about the invention of 'personality' in literature – many earlier storytellers like Homer and Petrarch could claim this - there is no doubt that Shakespeare's characters **resonate** with people very strongly. We sympathize with poor Hamlet because we all know that frustrating situation where our hearts tell us one thing must be true and our heads another. We laugh at the larger-than-life nurse in Romeo and Juliet because of the amusing way she offers advice to Juliet about relationships, putting practical considerations before romance; she is a person that we too have met. The name Lady Macbeth has become synonymous with cold, over-ambitious women; while the character of Iago still serves as a warning about the dangers of jealousy and how it leads to the manipulation of others.

Of course, the language plays a big part too. The observations about people and life are made more memorable by the way in which they are phrased, both succinctly and poetically. Shakespeare has been dead for 400 years, but certain words and sayings of his still exist in the English language today. Whether you are 'fashionable' or "faint-hearted", thank Shakespeare, who probably coined the terms. Iago promises to "wear his heart on his sleeve", a phrase still commonly used for people who do not try to hide their true feelings. In fact, it is amazing just how great Shakespeare's influence on everyday modern language has been. Take, for example, these commonly used phrases: a foregone conclusion, come full circle, has seen better days, break the ice, neither here nor there, the world is my oyster, a wild goose chase, love is blind.

Bloom's title The Invention of the Human may seem a bit strong. 'The enduring humanity of Shakespeare', on the other hand, would not be an exaggeration.

Questions 1-5. Read the text and choose the correct answer to each question.

1.What is the main purpose of the passage?

A. To explain why Shakespeare's poetry is more influential than his plays.
B. To examine several reasons for Shakespeare's lasting popularity and influence.
C. To compare Shakespeare's literary achievements with those of Homer and Petrarch.
D. To argue that Harold Bloom's interpretation of Shakespeare is completely convincing.

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2. According to Harold Bloom, what is particularly significant about Shakespeare's characters?

A. They were based largely on characters from earlier works of literature.
B. They represented idealised versions of people from Shakespeare's own time.
C. They possessed recognisable personalities and weaknesses that readers could identify with.
D. They introduced readers to psychological ideas that had never existed before.

*3. The word **"resonate"** in paragraph 3 is closest in meaning to:*

A. remain controversial among
B. have a strong emotional effect on
C. provide entertainment for
D. be difficult to understand for

4. What can be inferred from the discussion of Shakespeare's influence on the English language?

A. Shakespeare deliberately created expressions that would become widely used in the future.
B. Most modern English speakers are aware that many common expressions originated with Shakespeare.
C. Shakespeare's influence on modern English extends beyond his literary works to everyday communication.
D. Shakespeare's contribution to English vocabulary is greater than his contribution to literature.

5. Why does the writer say that The Invention of the Human "may seem a bit strong" but that "the enduring humanity of Shakespeare" would not be an exaggeration?

A. Shakespeare was the first writer to create realistic human characters.
B. Shakespeare's importance lies primarily in his ability to portray aspects of human nature that remain relevant.
C. Bloom exaggerated Shakespeare's contribution to literature but accurately described his influence on language.
D. Shakespeare's works have survived mainly because modern audiences continue to study them.

Do the following statements agree with the information given in the passage?

Write:

- **TRUE** if the statement agrees with the information
- **FALSE** if the statement contradicts the information
- **NOT GIVEN** if there is no information about this

6. Shakespeare's plays are currently translated and performed more frequently than those of any other playwright.

7. Harold Bloom believes that Shakespeare was the first writer to create characters who had both strengths and weaknesses.

8. The writer believes that Shakespeare's popularity is mainly the result of the beauty of his poetry.

9. Some expressions that Shakespeare may have coined are still commonly used in modern English.

10. Lady Macbeth is presented in the passage as an example of how jealousy can lead to the manipulation of other people.

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