

Shakespeare's Characters as Progeny of Nature – According to Dr. Samuel Johnson

Dr. Samuel Johnson, one of the greatest critics of English literature, offered one of the most influential analyses of Shakespeare in his famous essay “Preface to Shakespeare” (1765). In this work, he praises Shakespeare for his deep understanding of human nature and for creating characters that are “progeny of common humanity” — or as he beautifully puts it, “the genuine progeny of common humanity and offspring of observation.”

Below is a detailed explanation of what Dr. Johnson means when he calls Shakespeare's characters progeny of nature.

1. Meaning of “Progeny of Nature”

When Dr. Johnson refers to Shakespeare's characters as “progeny of nature,” he means that they are natural, realistic, and universally human. They are not artificial figures made to fit a specific moral, political, or religious idea. Instead, Shakespeare's characters behave like real men and women, driven by natural passions, emotions, and motives that belong to all times and places.

In short, they are born from nature, not from imagination or exaggeration.

2. Shakespeare's Deep Observation of Life

Dr. Johnson praises Shakespeare for his close and truthful observation of human life. He writes that Shakespeare “holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life.”

This means Shakespeare studies human beings — their joys, sorrows, ambitions, follies, and moral weaknesses — and represents them exactly as they are.

His characters are not idealized heroes but realistic reflections of the human heart.

3. Universality of Shakespeare's Characters

Dr. Johnson emphasizes that Shakespeare's characters are not limited by time, class, or nation. They are universal because their feelings and actions come from the basic nature of humanity.

For example:

Hamlet's hesitation, Macbeth's ambition, Othello's jealousy, and Lear's pride are not confined to a particular age or country.

Such emotions exist in every human being and in every era. Thus, his characters are not "characters of an age" but "characters of mankind."

4. Mixture of Good and Evil in Man

According to Dr. Johnson, Shakespeare's realism lies in his balanced portrayal of human nature. He does not divide the world into purely good or purely evil characters.

Each character is a mixture of virtues and vices, just like real people.

For instance:

Macbeth has both ambition and conscience.

Hamlet has both intellect and indecision.

Falstaff is both witty and cowardly.

This complexity of character shows Shakespeare's truth to nature.

5. Absence of Artificial Morality

Dr. Johnson notes that earlier dramatists often made characters act according to moral lessons or classical rules. Shakespeare, however, makes his characters act according to nature. He does not preach or moralize directly. Instead, his characters' actions and consequences teach moral truth naturally — by showing the real results of passion, folly, and virtue.

Thus, Johnson admires Shakespeare for being “the poet of nature,” not of rules or systems.

6. Realism in Dialogue and Behavior

Dr. Johnson also observes that Shakespeare's dialogue sounds natural and appropriate to each situation. The conversations flow as they would in real life — full of wit, emotion, hesitation, or contradiction.

Nothing feels forced or unnatural.

He writes that in Shakespeare's works, “a dialogue is level with life.”

This naturalness further proves that his characters are true children of nature.

7. Reflection of All Classes and Conditions

Shakespeare's plays include kings and clowns, philosophers and peasants, lovers and villains — yet all of them speak and behave in ways true to their status and personality.

This wide variety shows Shakespeare's deep understanding of all levels of human experience, another sign of his natural genius.

8. Conclusion

To Dr. Johnson, Shakespeare's greatness lies in his fidelity to nature.

He creates characters who are not the product of fancy or idealism but the living offspring of human observation and truth. That is why Dr. Johnson calls him “the poet of nature” — because his characters are “the progeny of nature”, reflecting universal human passions, emotions, and experiences.

In short, Shakespeare's art is not imitation of books or traditions, but imitation of life itself.

Summary Quote from Dr. Johnson:

- “Shakespeare is above all writers, at least above all modern writers, the poet of nature; the poet that holds up to his readers a faithful mirror of manners and of life.”

