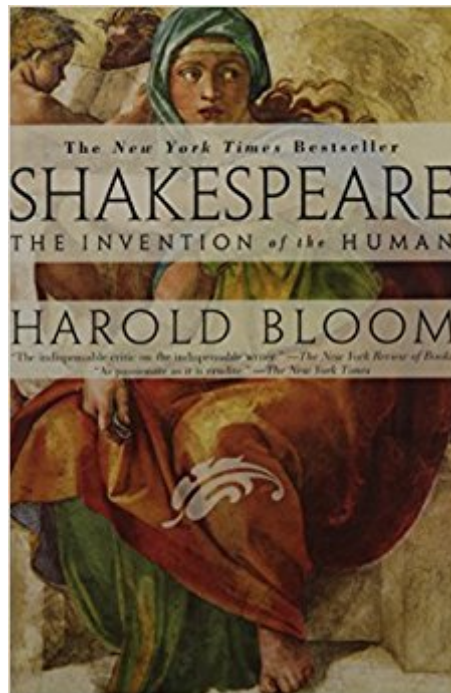


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Shakespeare: The Invention Of The Human



Synopsis

"The indispensable critic on the indispensable writer." -Geoffrey O'Brien, New York Review of Books
A landmark achievement as expansive, erudite, and passionate as its renowned author, Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human is the culmination of a lifetime of reading, writing about, and teaching Shakespeare. Preeminent literary critic and ultimate authority on the western literary tradition-Harold Bloom leads us through a comprehensive reading of every one of the dramatist's plays, brilliantly illuminating each work with unrivaled warmth, wit and insight. At the same time, Bloom presents one of the boldest theses of Shakespearean scholarship: that Shakespeare not only invented the English language, but also created human nature as we know it today.

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Customer Reviews

I appreciate all my fellow reviewer's criticisms about the book: yes it's true that Bloom was opinionated, non-politically correct, and a bit of a wacko at times. Still, he's one of the few 20th century critics who has the self confidence not to fall into lit. crit. jargon to express himself -- he manages to avoid the snobbiness that often accompanies Shakespeare studies. The word I would use to describe this work overall is uneven. Some chapters are so insightful that you may ask yourself how you could have ever read the play without reading the essay and still appreciated it. Others are small ruminations on interesting points which are much less earthshattering. Sure, there are much more "scholarly" essays out there on Shakespeare, but these are all READABLE essays, all well-written. I happen to enjoy Bloom's lack of tight structure. It's like sitting down with Bloom at a

coffee house or bar and hearing him ramble on about his thoughts and lifetime reflections on Shakespeare. But remember, Bloom was not just your average guy chewing his cud -- he's probably the most well-read and brilliant reader of our generation. Due to a sleep disorder that he had, he often would stay up all night and would typically consume several volumes of literature in one evening. So, when forced to listen to his musings, there are many kernels of brilliance that make their way to the surface. Many professors have begrudged him his popular success, but by avoiding jargon, Bloom does us all a service by popularizing Shakespeare for everyday readers and making us want to go back and read and reread Shakespeare. At the very least, these chapters will make you run to a bookstore to read more Shakespeare -- how can you criticize anyone who instills a passion for literature?

In *The Western Canon*, Harold Bloom stated that Shakespeare, along with Milton, was the center of Western thought. In *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, he contends that Shakespeare, alone, "went beyond all precedents (even Chaucer) and invented the human as we continue to know it." Bloom assigns Shakespeare the singular honor of being responsible for our personalities, not just in the Western world, but in all cultures. Falstaff and Hamlet, the central characters of Bloom's discourse are, he says, "the greatest of charismatics" and are "the inauguration of personality as we have come to recognize it." Naturally, critics of Bloom have taken great exception to sweeping statements such as the above and their general reaction is one of resentment. Individual critical response depends on what particular school of criticism the respondent adheres to, but most often critics and readers alike have simply attacked Bloom, himself. However, even those who denigrate both Bloom and this book have found the time to read and review it to a greater extent, rather than to a lesser. The book, itself, is made up of three major critical discussions by Bloom combined with brief discussions of each of Shakespeare's thirty-seven plays. Bloom begins by expressing his awe at Shakespeare's ability to create literary characters who epitomize the quintessential nature of humanity itself. In Bloom's opinion, Shakespeare shapes all of humanity, not just the elite literati. Bloom does acknowledge the fact that great writers existed before Shakespeare and says that, "The idea of Western character" defined as "the self as a moral agent" came from many sources at many different times.

The least important thing a great teacher does is the important task of providing the student with good information. The most valuable is to provide the student with sufficient challenge to stimulate passionate thinking so the student develops a framework to use in not only comprehending the topic

at hand, but also ready for use in further intellectual development. Even to the point of being able to rebuild the framework itself as life experience stimulates reconsideration. Bloom is a great teacher and it is hard for me to find the words to explain how grateful I am for this book. I should start off by saying what it is not. Even though it discusses each of the 39 plays it is not at all a compendium surveying the plays. This is a book with a specific thesis and discusses the plays in terms of that thesis. The idea, if I understand Bloom correctly, is that Shakespeare's understanding of the human creature; the nature of our lives as human creatures, combined with Shakespeare's preternatural artistic gifts has actually changed our understanding of what it is to be human. Like all truly great artists, what we think of them says nothing about the artist, but everything about us. Shakespeare is such a potent cultural influence that he informs the lives of those who have never heard of him, who have never read his plays, and even those who don't speak a syllable of English. Bloom has read so widely and so deeply that he has much to share with us. I am glad for his courage to speak against the fashions of our time and to tell the truth about our post-literate stage of thinking. However, feel free to disagree with him (and especially with me).

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