

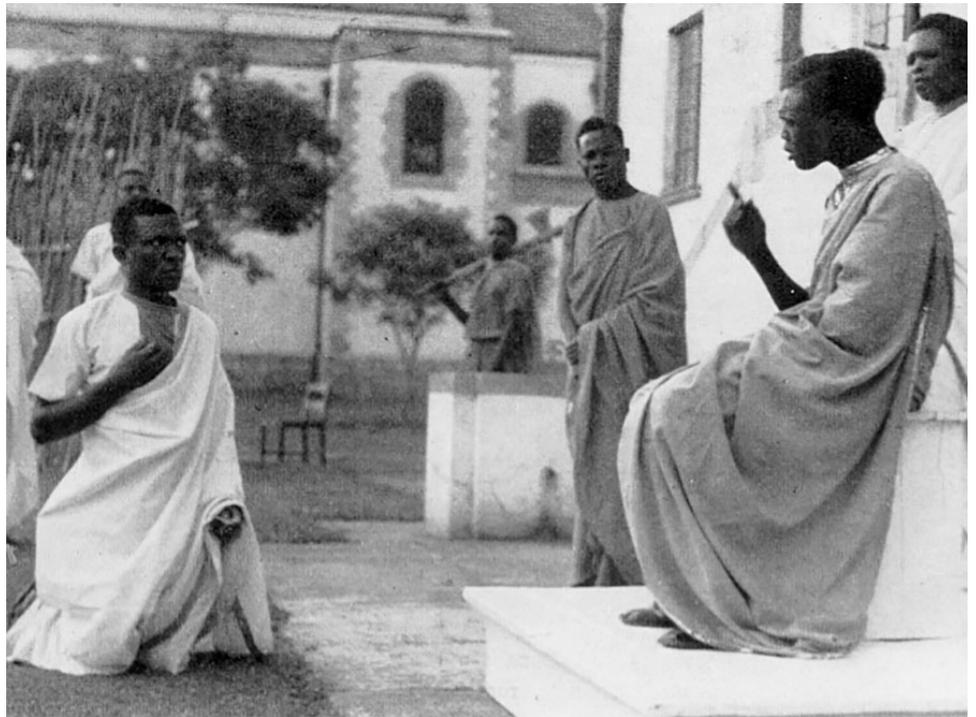
'Why I believe Shakespeare changed the world'



by **Edward Wilson Lee**

After growing up in Kenya and Switzerland, Edward Wilson Lee is now a fellow at Cambridge University, where he teaches early modern literature, including Shakespeare.

This year marks four centuries since William Shakespeare's death – but the bard's legacy is still felt across the entire world. What makes his work so enduring?



'Lend me your ears': actors put on one of Shakespeare's Roman plays.

Shakespeare's plays have had such a great influence over so much of the globe that they have long since ceased to be 'English' in any true sense: they have become a possession of the world.

By 1930 there were rumoured to be 4,000 translations of his plays in Indian dialects alone – so many, in fact, that no-one has ever counted them all.

His works have been translated into almost every world language (including [Esperanto](#), British Sign Language, and [Hip Hop](#)).

"FROM ABOUT 1700 TO ABOUT 1950, WHEREVER THE BRITISH WENT, THEY TOOK THEIR IDOL SHAKESPEARE WITH THEM."

In many cases, as with the Swahili tongue spoken by 140 million people in East Africa, Shakespearean stories featured in the first books produced as printing technology spread around the globe.

His writings have inspired masterpieces of cinema from Japan and Italy, and comforted [freedom fighters](#) from Cuba to South Africa.

The Russian national poet, [Alexander Pushkin](#), once said that after God, Shakespeare was the greatest creator of men – a saying that the Ethiopian Emperor [Haile Selassie I](#) was fond of quoting.

Why has Shakespeare had such an effect on people? After all, he led a pretty uneventful life. He was born the son of a glovemaker and never travelled outside of his native country. He wasn't uneducated, but he didn't go to university and he wasn't particularly privileged.

He was an extraordinarily voracious reader, and he clearly loved words deeply – but is that enough to change the world?

Some would argue that Shakespeare's global success is down to the power of the [British Empire](#). There is some weight to this argument.

During the 250 years spanning from about 1700 to about 1950, wherever the British went, they took their idol Shakespeare with them.

More often than not, they forced him upon the people whose lands they colonised. Perhaps some writer would have served this purpose even if it were not Shakespeare, and it is hard to disprove this without the chance to go back and do history over differently.

But then, a great many people have read and performed Shakespeare even when they weren't being forced to, including outside the British Empire and after it ended – even, sometimes, when they didn't know it was Shakespeare they were reading.

The secret to this, I think, lies in the fact that Shakespeare was not just a genius with words, but that he wrote plays. In order to make these plays compelling, the characters had to be convincing, and this meant thinking in great detail about why someone would act in this way or that way.

This was especially difficult, but especially important, when the character was acting in a way that might have seemed strange or wrong. Shakespeare almost never simply writes his characters off as bad; instead he tries to understand what would drive a person to behave in that manner.

In doing so, he created a world of fascinating and very different characters, providing something for almost anyone to be interested in.

But he also gave us a great lesson in understanding the motivations and beliefs of others, something that (much more often than not) causes us to judge them less harshly than we did before. This gave Shakespeare the breadth to appeal to people across the world, but also lent them a powerful voice to advocate compassion for those who are different.

Shakespeare in Swahiland by Edward Wilson- Lee will be published by William Collins on 24 March 2016.

YOU DECIDE

Do you agree with the statement that Shakespeare's plays are a 'possession of the world'?

ACTIVITIES

Translate your favourite scene from Shakespeare into modern-day English.

WORD WATCH

Esperanto – An 'international' language which was designed by LL Zamenhof in 1887 to be an easy-to-learn, politically-neutral language. It is spoken by around two million people.

Hip Hop – The Hip Hop Shakespeare Company argues that 'both hip-hop music and Shakespeare's theatre represent energetic and inventive forms of expression. Both are full of

poetry, word play and lyricism. Both deal with what it is to be human... we think hip-hop would have been Shakespeare's thing.'

Freedom fighters – At the Robben Island prison where Nelson Mandela and other South African political prisoners were held during the fight against Apartheid, a copy of Shakespeare's complete works was passed between prisoners, and referred to as 'The Bible'.

Alexander Pushkin –

Pushkin is known as the founder of modern Russian literature, and lived from 1799 to 1837.

Haile Selassie I – The Ethiopian Emperor ruled from 1930 to 1974.

British Empire – At its height, the British Empire was the largest in history, comprising around one-fifth of the world's population.

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 Notes

