Shakespeare in the Wild West

Introduction

Throughout the Elizabethan era, Shakespeare’s comedies were rapidly becoming highbrow entertainment, with special performances for both Queen Elizabeth and King James. Enjoyed in leisure and studied in classrooms, these plays have continued to entertain and educate for the past 400 years. Mr. William Shakespeare himself is considered the world’s most accomplished playwright. With all of this in mind, it seems impossible that the complex elegance of Shakespeare’s writing could ever be compared to the “bang-bang shoot ‘em up” of the Western Dime Novel genre. Dime novels are quite honestly worth little more than a dime. They were the lowbrow entertainment of the 1800s, with their primary purpose being escapism for the uppity Easterners longing for the freedom of the Wild West. They could hardly rest on the same bookshelf as a Shakespearean comedy, let alone be academically analyzed. However, upon reading both genres and understanding their common elements, there are remarkable similarities. Western dime novels and Shakespearian comedies have an overwhelming number of common themes, ranging from a multiple-marriage ending to the lack of mother figures. In order to demonstrate these parallels, Deadwood Dick: Prince of the Road, written by Edward Wheeler, shall stand in as a representative of the Western dime novel genre. Likewise, Much Ado About Nothing will be the model for Shakespearian comedy.

With the understanding that these two genres share common plot elements and character types, the next question is how. How are there similarities between plays performed for the Queen and the low-brow entertainment of American frontierism? I propose that one explanation is escapism. Almost every one of Shakespeare’s comedy plays takes place outside of England, where his primary audience was at the time. Additionally, the target audience for western dime novels were those living in the American east. The common themes addressed in this essay are devices used to give the audience a look
at another lifestyle, in another place and another time. Whether or not the untrained authors of dime novels were familiar with Shakespeare’s writing is not the focus—rather, the significance of these similarities come from the human desire to escape their current situation and be swept away by language.

**Contexts of the Genres**

For decades, scholars have evaluated the effects that dime novels have on their readers. According to Charles M. Harvey, dime novels are “offending books,” and “nearly every sort of misdemeanor into which the fantastic element enters, from train robbery to house-burning,” can be attributed to them (Harvey). It was not unusual in the late 1800s and early 1900s for dime novels to be “directly blamed for the moral downfall of hundreds of young men” (Pearson 7). Edmund Pearson, on the other hand, has much more to say in defense of dime novels. In *Dime Novels: Or, Following an Old Trail in Popular Literature*, Pearson offers an argument for their value, saying, “There is nothing more grotesque than the charge that they were ‘immoral,’ since they were so amusingly strict in their moral standards” (8). In *Deadwood Dick*, there are murders and bar fights and “gallons of blood [that] made the floor slippery and reeking,” yet still the conclusion contains messages of justice and good triumphing over evil (Wheeler 61). For critics to say that dime novels are immoral diminishes their value no more than concerned parents petitioning to ban Shakespeare from classrooms.

Speaking of Shakespeare’s writings, their own influence on the audience has long been debated as well. Shakespeare’s tragedy plays are said to provide cathartic experiences for the audience, allowing them to purge their own emotions by watching the trials of others on stage. As for Shakespeare’s comedies, there is concern that the mocking of fictional characters will result in cruelty on the spectator end as well. A prime example of this would be the biting words of Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, leaving poor Benedick to feel “like a man at a mark,
with a whole army shooting at me” (2.1.221-223). Luckily, according to David Richman, the audience is not made brutal through the mocking of various characters. Richman first says, “Spectators are invited either to participate in the whipping that these plays administer to vice and folly, or to have their own follies and vices taxed by the whippers.” However, he also mentions that “Playgoers are almost never permitted to relish an absolute, unsympathetic superiority to their characters. The playwright develops numerous ways to mitigate the audience’s scorn” (Richman 22). In this way, instead of judglingly joining in on the belittlement of characters, the audience must evaluate their own selves before scorning others. In addition, Shakespeare is not using his comedy plays to critique or reflect upon society as some other plays might. John Russell Brown expands on this by saying, “Critics who try to explain the lasting success of Shakespeare’s early comedies…and those who merely exhort us to enjoy them, are all agreed that they have little satiric purpose. Shakespeare did not often write as Ben Johnson would say, to ‘reprove’ mankind” (Brown 13). Shakespeare’s early comedy plays, like Much Ado About Nothing, are not meant to be satirical. Just as dime novels cannot be blamed for the immoral acts of men, Shakespeare’s comedies are not meant to harden readers or satirically mock them.

Multiple Plotlines

One of the key features of a Shakespearean comedy is the seemingly unrelated tangle of plots and side stories that somehow come together perfectly in the end. In Much Ado About Nothing, the two primary plots consist of the Hero/Claudio and Beatrice/Benedick love stories. There are also smaller and less complex stories, such as that of the villain Don John and the clownish Dogberry. All of these plots coexist in the fact that they occur in the same Italian setting at Leonato’s house, yet not much else ties them together at first. For example, what does
the playful banter of Beatrice and Benedick have to do with the revenge plot of Don John?

However, Shakespeare manages to bring each of these plot points together by uniting them under the Hero and Claudio conflict. Don John gets his revenge (sort of), Beatrice and Benedick are both invested in helping their friends, Dogberry reveals the villain, and all plot lines are harmoniously brought together in the happy reunion. In fact, it is Hero and Claudio’s falling out that brings Beatrice and Benedick together. Not only does Benedick swear to duel with Claudio to show his love to Beatrice, but he also demonstrates a true interest in her wellbeing. Shortly before the second wedding attempt, Beatrice and Benedick hold the following conversation:

“And now tell me, how doth your cousin?”

“Very ill."

“And how do you?”

“Very ill too.”

“Serve God, love me, and mend.” (5.2.82-87)

Here, Benedick does not ask for anything from Beatrice other than love. The word mend is gentle, implying that he has true concern for her during this difficult time. Without Hero being publicly humiliated by Claudio, the Beatrice and Benedick romance may have taken even longer to blossom. Thus, Shakespeare has brought two plotlines together with one climactic conflict.

In Deadwood Dick, the scene changes are not nearly as smooth, and the “unified” ending is far more abrupt. The first several chapters contain a new set of characters each time—as a reader, it can be difficult to follow the winding plot that is the Western dime novel. Opening with Deadwood himself, the book then swiftly jumps from character to character, tracing the
backstories of Fearless Frank, Ned Harris, Anita, Calamity Jane, Redburn, Alice Terry, and General Nix. Even after making it through the first half of *Deadwood*, it’s difficult to see how these characters can be brought together. A brief and unhappy reunion between Ned Harris and Fearless Frank gives context for their relationship as rivals, yet the full meshing of the plot lines does not come until the final chapter. Here, we discover that Deadwood Dick himself is in fact Anita’s long-lost brother, and Fearless Frank is her husband. The old General Nix is the sweet Alice’s father, and of course, Alice ends up becoming engaged to Redburn. Even Calamity Jane is brought into the conclusion when she receives a marriage proposal from Deadwood Dick. Although Jane refuses, the act of proposing gives the two a meaningful connection that brings each of the plot lines to a unified stopping point.

The act of masterly (or messily) weaving several plotlines before finally fusing them takes the audience on a journey. The possibility of boredom is eliminated, thus making escapism a much more manageable concept. While Shakespeare does not end his plays with nearly as many surprises as Wheeler does, he still excites the audience with revelations, like when Hero’s identity is revealed to Claudio. Both Shakespeare and Wheeler successfully guide their readers through a trail of plot crumbs and lead them to a feast of happy reunions and closure at the end.

**The “Fool” Character**

Shakespeare is famous for his fools. Sometimes wise, most times foolish, these clown characters act as comedic relief during some of the darker moments of Shakespeare’s plays. Common characteristics of these “fool” types are misunderstandings and sloppy speech. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, we find this in Dogberry. Whether they find him hilarious or unbearable, every reader can gather by his lines that he is not up to par with the intelligence of the other characters. A classic example of this is his line, “Oh, villain! Thou wilt be condemned into
everlasting redemption for this” (4.2.56-57). By “redemption,” the context implies that dear Dogberry really meant to say “damnation.” Also, there are some blunders in his actions, which classify Dogberry as a foolish and simpleminded character, and therefore make him the perfect mechanism for some giggles.

In *Deadwood Dick*, a character that could be seen as an outsider in a similar “foolish” way is General Nix. Far older and goofier than the other characters, this man speaks in the traditional Western dialect that is hard for even the most careful of readers to interpret. In one of his first few lines, the General says, “Yas, she; fer I calkylate ‘twern’t no he as made them squawks. Sing out like a bellerin’ bull, now, an’ et ar’ more or less likely—consider’bly more of less ‘n less of more—that she will respond!” (Wheeler 5). Just his pronunciation of the word “calculate” signifies that General Nix is meant to entertain and not necessarily add as much substance to the story as a primary character would.

With the use of local dialect for each of these characters, both Shakespeare and Wheeler give their readers a taste of what life is like in the far-off location of the story. Part of the escapism of these two genres is enhanced by the outlandishness of the fool characters—in the minds of readers, the fool is not someone they’re likely to identify with. What better way to convince the audience they’ve stepped out of their homes and into the setting itself?

**Strong Female Characters**

My favorite elements of these two genres are the strong female characters featured in each example text. However, there are also weak and vulnerable female characters, which only work to enhance the power of the stronger Beatrice and Calamity Jane. The primary women in *Deadwood Dick* fit the stereotypical female stock character for western dime novels—they are
sensitive, beautiful, and always in need of protection. The first time we see Alice Terry, she “was stripped to the waist...[with] numerous welts...and she was evidently insensible” (Wheeler 7). Finding a woman in such a vulnerable situation immediately sets her up to be in need of protection from a male figure. Additionally, when Anita is first described, she is asleep, and a kiss upon her “fresh, unpolluted lips...caused the sleeping beauty to smile in her dreams” (28). Both women are initially introduced in extremely vulnerable situations, both unconscious and with no control over their surroundings. Lucky for them, those who find them are strong and protective young men—Wheeler has perfectly created situations in which these women need a classic western protagonist. By setting these female characters in vulnerable situations, Wheeler establishes their femininity by their need for strength and protection.

In contrast, Calamity Jane breaks the vulnerable female mold through both her actions and her appearance. In the Western dime novel genre, Edward Wheeler was one of the first to feature a strong female figure like Calamity Jane. Because this type of character was so unprecedented in his genre, Wheeler classified Jane more as a man than a woman, which is signified by descriptions of her “tanned costume of buck-skin...[and] jaunty Spanish sombrero” (25). In fact, it isn’t clear that she’s a woman until Ned reveals it a few lines later. Throughout this dime novel and several of its sequels, Calamity Jane goes on to rescue others from bar fights, live independent of anyone else, and “swear like a trooper” (25). She varies significantly from the other characters, Anita and Alice, in the fact that she is not portrayed as vulnerable to the reader.

One might say that Shakespeare takes his female characters a step further by allowing them to be both strong and vulnerable. Hero is certainly left vulnerable after Claudio accuses her of fornication, and that leaves her helpless the way Anita and Alice were in their stories.
However, Beatrice manages to open herself up to the dangers of love (albeit slowly). This leaves her vulnerable, but it does not take away her fierce independence. The ways in which her character defies female stereotypes are shown when she declares, “Oh, that I were a man for his sake! …I cannot be a man with wishing, therefore I will die a woman grieving” (4.1.316-322). She has the drive and the intelligence to accomplish everything she desires, so the only thing holding her back are social barriers.

With both Wheeler and Shakespeare creating strong female characters for their genres, they add to the exciting and outlandish aspects of escapism. For female audience members, these strong females may be entirely relatable—inspiring, even. For a male audience during the time period these genres were popular, they may have found these independent females intriguing and different from what they are used to. In either case, both genders in the audience are affected by women who take charge of their own situation.

**Multiple Marriages**

One of the most identifiable signs of a Shakespearean comedy is the fact that there are always multiple marriages in the end. In the case of *Much Ado About Nothing*, the happy couples are Beatrice with Benedick and Hero with Claudio. Surprisingly, *Deadwood Dick* also ends with the joyous engagements of multiple couples. Although Deadwood himself is unsuccessful at wooing either Alice or Calamity Jane, other men have greater luck. Fearless Frank is reunited with his dear Anita, and Redburn successfully proposes to Alice Terry. And although Deadwood Dick was unable to domesticate the stubbornly independent Calamity Jane in this novel, future dime novel sequels bring them together once more.
Marriage is a very whimsical, happy ending to any book or play. It leaves the audience feeling fulfilled in the sense that characters’ relationships are brought to a satisfying close. Marriage, although in reality only the beginning of a couple’s journey together, is often seen as a closing point (like in any Disney princess movie). The possibility of escapism for the audience is enhanced when they are able to see the progression and ultimate climax of a relationship between two characters.

**Villains**

Nothing excites an audience more than the conquering of a villain. Shakespeare’s plays are chalk full of them, as are dime novels. What’s interesting about *Deadwood Dick: Prince of the Road* is that Deadwood Dick himself can be considered a misunderstood villain, in the more Robin Hood sense of the word. He murders and robs, yet the dime novel does not portray him as the primary villain. In reality, the villains are the two Filmores that Deadwood robbed on the road, who both end up executed at the end for their attempt at murdering Deadwood Dick. *Much Ado About Nothing* is far more straightforward with its villain—Don John is clearly the one who drives the plot with his evil revenge plan. However, *Much Ado* can be considered an exception in this regard because unlike Shakespeare’s other plays, the villain here does not receive a punishment. In *Merchant of Venice*, Shylock is forced to convert and give up half of his money to Antonio, and in *Measure for Measure*, Angelo is forced to marry as his punishment. Yet Don John escapes without any repercussions. Despite this somewhat unsatisfactory ending in regards to the villain, the act of identifying the villain itself can be thrilling for an audience. Dramatic irony, in which the audience knows who started the conflict but the characters don’t, is a driving point for escapism. It is used in both *Deadwood Dick* and *Much Ado*, and it can be initially painful for the audience to endure. However, the wait is well worth it when they see the hidden
villain brought into light, and ultimately brought to justice. Since readers cannot always conquer their own demons and villains, watching it happen on stage or reading it in a book can be both satisfying and cathartic.

**These Genres at War**

There are several ways through which Shakespeare’s comedy plays can promote escapism. In 1917, the Kitchener Souvenir Committee began distributing plays to British soldiers wounded in World War I. Edmund King, after analyzing some of the diaries and correspondence of these soldiers, came to understand how Shakespeare’s works affected their soldier mentality. He writes, “readers used Shakespeare as a form of escapism or a way of asserting a civilian identity separate from military service” (King 230). With this significant influence on soldiers, many of them possibly suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, it becomes easier to imagine how escapism can occur with average play-goers as well.

As for *Deadwood Dick* and other dime novels, a surprisingly similar situation occurred. According to Jeremy Agnew, these books were used “to fill the need for escapist literature as a form of entertainment. Similarly, during the Civil War, dime novels were read by soldiers who needed an escape from boredom between battles” (Agnew 32). Both genres, one monopolized by Shakespeare and the other considered “literary garbage,” managed to aid soldiers both during and after the hardships of war. There are few arguments strong enough that could knock down the significance of Shakespeare’s writings—he was a genius for his time and his works have accomplished a great many more things than just escapism. But, this idea that Western dime novels could potentially do as much good as Shakespeare’s plays during war time really grows their potential for further study and analysis.
Conclusion

With all of these elements in mind, including complex plot structure, fool characters, multiple marriages, villains, and strong female characters, it becomes clear that Western dime novels and Shakespeare’s comedies share several themes. In fact, there are still other themes that could be included here, including the fact that disguises are commonly used and mothers are often missing from the stories. The question as to why these themes work for such different audiences comes down to the reader’s intent. Whether the Queen of England or a curious boy from New York in the 1800s, it is human nature to wonder what life is like “elsewhere.” Escapism is what drives these themes—giving readers everyday characters in outlandish situations allows them to step away from their own lives, while still receiving messages that are relevant to them. Readers of Deadwood Dick: Prince of the Road don’t assume to be taught a moral lesson, yet it is there amongst the gamblers and gold diggers of the Wild West. As for the difference in critical acclaim, it could be as simple as the time in which the two genres were popular. According to Edmund Pearson, “Popular literature, and its enjoyment, is seldom the concern of the scholarly critic, until three or four centuries have passed. It is a social phenomenon rather than a matter of artistic achievement” (17). While the authors of dime novels may not have been artists like William Shakespeare, they certainly succeeded in entertaining their audience. With so many common themes, the pattern would be completed if someday dime novels are studied the way Shakespeare’s own characters are analyzed and brought to life by critics.

Works Cited


