



4 The trouble is that most schoolchildren today don't like him and don't get it. And this isn't their fault. Shakespeare wrote over 400 years ago. Few people realize how much English has changed in just the last generation. Grammar and vocabulary have altered to the extent that teenagers tend to dismiss anything written before about 1960 as "Old English."

5 Besides, the large and increasing number of second-language speakers are in the same boat as Voltaire and Tolstoy from the start. We don't have anything like the unified national culture we had when I first studied Shakespeare in the 1970s. Then, most schoolchildren had at least some exposure to the King James Bible, the Book of Common Prayer and Hymns Ancient and Modern. We still didn't find Shakespeare easy, but at least we didn't need to have "thee" and "thou" explained to us.

6 Even the key selling point that many Shakespearisms have entered common usage is gradually losing its force as the years go by. I was recently taken aback to discover that virtually none of a class of London teenagers had encountered the expression "one fell swoop." Well, you might say, here's your chance to teach them, then. But that cannot be the justification for making Shakespeare **compulsory**—to teach outdated idioms that no one under the age of 40 uses.

7 We need to think more clearly about the purpose of **enshrining** Shakespeare in this manner. If it's to preserve his national monument status, this is an unnecessary and counter-productive way of going about it. If it is to teach those things that literature is supposed to teach—**aesthetic** pleasure, understanding of character, moral sensitivity, liberal humanist values, an **inkling** of the techniques by which literary texts work their magic—then Shakespeare is simply not delivering. It's like handing pupils treasure in a locked chest. More contemporary texts may not offer quite such riches, but at least the kids could open the box.

8 Making today's school children read Shakespeare is about as sensible as compelling them to read Ulysses or Tristram Shandy. For all but a few—the brightest and best-read—it is a form of torture. Yet it's laid down in the National Curriculum that all British children of secondary school age must study not one but two Shakespeare plays. It is, as Will himself would say, a custom more honored in the breach than in the observance—and in practice, many teachers **circumvent** the difficulty by teaching a fragment of *Romeo and Juliet* and then showing the class *West Side Story*.

9 By the time students come to choose their AS-levels [preparation for college], those with a liking for literature should be ready to appreciate the riches Shakespeare has to offer. Let them wait until then. This isn't "dumbing down." Force-feeding children Shakespeare can only **induce** nausea and a lifelong **aversion**. If we want Shakespeare to be for all time as well of an age, we must let students come to him when they are willing and able to make the effort needed to enjoy him. Surely this is a tribute our national writer deserves?

## Second Read

- Reread the article to answer these text-dependent questions.
- Write any additional questions you have about the text in your Reader/Writer Notebook.

1. **Key Ideas and Details:** Why do many schools continue to put Shakespeare in the curriculum?

### My Notes

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**compulsory:** required

**enshrining:** preserving with respect

**aesthetic:** concerned with notions of beauty

**inkling:** hint

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**circumvent:** get around

**induce:** cause

**aversion:** strong feeling of dislike

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