Reflection: Shakespeare and Education

1-3 pages by email to sad4@cornell.edu by Thursday, March 20 at 9:00 – or whenever

This is a request for an optional reflection piece on Shakespeare and education -- yours or that of others -- which you are encouraged to send me by e-mail. It won't be graded, nor will you be spanked for not doing it.

I'm curious about what role Shakespeare has played in your education -- chiefly secondary, but perhaps primary and college as well -- and what you think about it. It would be good to hear about such things as SOME of the following:

• What plays, at what levels of study, have you been assigned? (In what schools and what countries were those assignments made? American public/private? Foreign? International? Schools in/outside former British Commonwealth countries? etc.)

• How have they been pitched to you -- with what explanation? Why were you said to be reading/performing Shakespeare? What values have been associated with plays and poems by this author?

• Have the plays been a part any examinations, other than ordinary course exams, that had an impact on your educational future (e.g. CEEB, Regents', Advanced Placement, International Diploma)?

• At your school, were students at the same grade level but on different "tracks" or at different levels of ability assigned different texts? (Here I'm imagining a situation in which, for example, 11th graders in "advanced" or "college preparatory" sections got Hamlet while others got Of Mice and Men.)

• What was the teaching of Shakespeare like? Inspired/inspiring? Imaginative? Competent? Mechanical/dull? What were students' reactions like?

• So what do you think about the institutionalization of S. in school curricula? Valuable? Cumbersome but necessary? Worthless? For what ends? (Any suggestive, intriguing, salacious, or funny anecdotes associated with the teaching and study of S. would be much appreciated.)

On the back are a couple of memorable remarks on Shakespeare in the schools, American and British.
"[In American schools] Shakespeare becomes theatrical spinach: He's good for you. If you digest enough of his plays, you'll grow up big and strong intellectually like teacher."

In [British] education Shakespeare has been made to speak mainly for the [political] right . . . . His construction in English culture generally as the great National Poet whose plays embody universal truths has led to his being used to underwrite established practices in literary criticism and, consequently, in examinations. For literary criticism, Shakespeare is the keystone which guarantees the ultimate stability and rightness of the category 'Literature'. The status of other authors may be disputed -- indeed, one of the ways criticism offers itself as serious and discriminating is by engaging in such disputes, policing its boundaries. But Shakespeare is always there as the final instance of the validity of Literature. Then, because it is such a profound and universal experience, Literature must be taught to school pupils, whereupon it becomes an instrument within the whole apparatus of filtering whereby schools adjust young people to an unjust social order.