

SHAKESPEARE NEVER EXISTED

AN SAT VOCABULARY STORY



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BIG WORDS MADE SIMPLE.

Shakespeare Never Existed: An SAT Vocabulary Story

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Disclaimer in plain English:

I’m going to do the very best I can to help you, but ultimately, the only person who can improve your vocabulary (and SAT/ACT score) is you. Please don’t sue me.

My name is Portia, and I am a Shakespearean scholar. Except I'm not, because Shakespeare never existed.

I won't bother trying to convince you he did. I've wasted enough time on that fruitless pursuit already.

The question is, *what do I do next?* My nearly-complete Ph.D. is nearly worthless. Nobody wants to read 250 meticulously footnoted pages about a man who never was. Never mind that he revolutionized literature, gave us fair Romeo, and added more than 1,000 words to the English lexicon...

But I digress. You're probably wondering how I found myself in this extraordinary position, and I'm happy to tell you. That way, if you find yourself in similarly extraordinary circumstances, you might not make the same mistake I did.

Two years ago, I walked into my advisor's office to go over some last-minute modifications to my dissertation. It was a cold Tuesday morning, the kind that leaves little room for thoughts except, "must seek shelter" as you clutch the edges of your collar against the wind. I wasn't expecting much in the way of modifications. It was too late for that. I was due to present in just six weeks, so you can imagine my thoughts when old Dr. Bronson gave me a quizzical look just a few sentences into our conversation.

"Shakespeare, young lady?" Hands crossed over a wooden cane, Dr. Bronson squinted at me through thick glasses. "Who is this 'Shakespeare'? Another source you've found?"

Fruitless - Unproductive; failing to produce desired results

Pursuit - A specific activity or undertaking

Meticulously - Carefully; precisely

Revolutionized - Changed something radically or fundamentally

Lexicon - The vocabulary of a person or language

Digress - Leave the main subject; go off-topic

Modifications - Changes made to something

I adjusted my bag, responding with a quizzical look of my own. "Er, no, professor. But perhaps now isn't the best time? I could come back..."

"Nonsense!" Dr. Bronson stamped his cane. "You're studying the impact of oral tradition on 16th century English literature. Have been for the past five years."

"Oral tradition is just one chapter, professor, how Shakespeare borrowed—"

"Again with this 'Shakespeare!'" Bronson interrupted. "Portia, you're a good student, and you'll make a fine professor, but you're letting the pressure of the work get to you. Go home. We'll talk once you've had a rest."

Brow furrowed, I mumbled confused apologies and began the walk home.

Home. I'd purchased a minuscule cottage two blocks from campus six months before. It was white, scarcely 700 square feet, and the down payment cost every penny I had (never mind the leaking roof and constantly-rupturing pipes), but just thinking about it put a lightness back in my step. It was *mine*.

But for the first time since I'd lived there, a greater concern outweighed the pride of a new purchase.

Dr. Bronson was a man of a certain age. His absent-mindedness wasn't overly surprising. It started the same way with Gramps, with sudden gaps in his memory...

Grinding my teeth, I realized that if a difficult conversation needed to be had, it would be better if it happened now, before he started making embarrassing slips in giant lecture halls. After such a storied career, Dr. Bronson deserved to retire with pride.

Turning on my heel, I intended to have a discreet conversation with the dean.

Instead, I collided with an equally distracted individual. He was even taller than I — which doesn't happen often, since I am nearly six feet tall. We'd have become more than acquaintances quickly, for our lips were at nearly the same height, had his face not been buried in a book.

Quizzical - Indicating mild or amused puzzlement or confusion

Minuscule - Extremely small

Rupturing - Bursting or breaking suddenly

Outweighed – Be more important than (something else)

Discreet - In a way designed not to draw attention

Collided - Ran into; hit with force while moving

“Tony?” I stumbled back a step, rubbing my nose.

Tony blinked slowly. I gave him a second. I’d been there, too, so consumed by a book I forget who (and where) I am.

“Portia,” Tony nodded in my direction before returning to his walk and (evidently) compelling narrative.

I wasn’t offended. Instead, I suppressed a laugh and admired the broad shoulders of his already-retreating form.

Tony was another graduate student, but I was only vaguely aware of his topic of study. Something to do with mollusks, maybe? “Sessile marine species,” was the phrase. If he preferred the company of wildlife to that of humans, who was I to judge? As a historian, I often preferred the company of the long-gone to that of my chattering peers.

Further conversation was clearly futile — Tony was already half a block away — so I gave my head a shake and steeled myself for the unpleasant conversation ahead.

I’ll skip the play-by-play of my discussion with the dean. Suffice it to say that I expressed concerns about Dr. Bronson’s mental state, but left questioning my own.

The dean had never heard of Shakespeare either.

“All the world’s a stage...the men and women nearly players,” Shakespeare wrote. “They have their exits and their entrances...”

I was lying in bed, hands folded, staring at the ceiling. I’d barely moved for five hours — not since my world came crashing down in a way I’d never, ever considered.

After my conversations with Dr. Bronson and the dean, I did what any good scholar would do: I turned to Google. (Yes, we use it, too).

Google had never heard of Shakespeare either. “Did you mean Shakira?” it asked, hoping to be helpful. Frantically, I searched page after page, using different

Compelling - Extremely interesting; drawing attention in an irresistible way

Suppressed - Repressed; prevented

Sessile - Fixed in one place; unable to move

Futile - Pointless

combinations of words, checking my spelling, but there was no reference to the Bard of Avon.

He had exited the stage, to use his quote.

And now it was my turn...to do what? Surely there was a reason why I was singled out? I wasn't the foremost Shakespearean scholar on the planet. There were others far older and wiser than I.

If I was chosen, that is, and I'm not just losing my mind, a less helpful part of me added.

Glancing at my threadbare surroundings, is it any surprise that I turned away from that depressing line of thought, focusing instead on a more pecuniary angle?

Whether Shakespeare was real or a figment of my imagination, I was sitting on a gold mine. If he were still alive, he'd be a billionaire. It would be like if J.K. Rowling simply ceased to exist, but you alone remembered *Harry Potter*...

Strumming my fingers, I sent up a silent prayer asking William Shakespeare — wherever he was now — to bless my little plan.

Then I reached for my computer.

“Convoluted, pretentious, unreadable...”

I threw the critics' reviews of *Romeo and Juliet* on my kitchen table.

“So my students insisted,” I muttered, “back when I could still teach this.”

I'd made something of a show over the fact that I'd received a book deal. I had to! What other reason could I give for delaying my dissertation? I no longer had anything to present, but I also didn't want to withdraw from the program entirely. A book deal gave me time.

Threadbare - Poor or shabby; thin and worn with age

Pecuniary - Relating to money

Ceased - Stopped

Convoluted - Complex and difficult to follow

Pretentious - Self-important; trying to impress by acting more important/talented than is the case

“The publishers wait for no man...” I told the dean. “An opportunity not to be missed...”

Technically speaking, I hadn’t *actually* received a book deal when I had those conversations, but I knew it would happen. *Romeo and Juliet* had been published millions of times. Luckily, I secured a contract not long after.

And now? I was a universally-panned literary failure, seven years into a worthless degree.

A sharp rap on my door interrupted my self-flagellation. A lanky individual stood on my doorstep, brandishing a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* like it was a revelation from on high.

“Where did you get this?” Tony demanded.

“I wrote it,” I said slowly. “Thanks for buying it, though, your support means a lot...”

I’d only seen him a handful of times since that fateful day two years ago. Unlike then, however, when his energy positively radiated “not interested,” there was a hard intensity to his gaze now. I fought the urge to fall back a step.

“You didn’t write this,” he said. “William Shakespeare of Stratford-upon-Avon did.”

I swallowed. Yes, Tony was accusing me of plagiarism, but he was also reassuring me of my sanity. I’d held it together quite well for the past two years, but there was always the fear...

“William Shakespeare doesn’t exist,” I said, voice scarcely louder than a whisper.

Tony pushed my door open, brushing past me. “We need to talk.”

Panned - Harshly criticized

Flagellation - Whipping or beating

Brandishing - Waving or flourishing in anger or excitement

Revelation - Something (often surprising) that is revealed

Radiated - Spread from a central point

Scarcely - Hardly; barely

I put two cups of coffee on the table, trying to marshal my thoughts.

“I thought,” I said, slowly seating myself, “that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet. And surely I was left with this knowledge so I could use it? Who cares whose name is on the cover?”

“An interesting moral question,” Tony said, hands circling his cup. “Though it hasn’t been explored, for obvious reasons.”

“Mmmm,” I mumbled.

“You could even argue that Shakespeare did the same thing. Half his plays are based on historical events, or existing stories he repurposed,” Tony continued, officially sharing more consecutive words than I’d ever heard him utter.

“An argument, I can assure you, I’ve made to myself,” I replied.

Tony couldn’t remember when he realized that none of his peers had ever heard of Shakespeare. Not studying the man, the subject didn’t come up often.

“Here and there, a passing comment wouldn’t register with people,” he explained. “Or they’d think I was so clever... At first I thought it was just that no one else quotes Shakespeare. Then I realized they thought I was inventing the lines, too.”

“And eventually you got curious, and turned to Google?”

“Bingo,” he replied.

We commiserated in silence for a moment.

“I bumped into you that day,” I said eventually. “The day I found out.”

Tony squinted, looking out the window. “For now, I’m less interested in the ‘how’ than the ‘why.’”

I refilled our cups, sliding his across the table. “Some are born great. Some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.”

“Let me guess,” Tony replied. “Shakespeare?”

Marshal - Organize; assemble in order

Consecutive - Following continuously; back-to-back

Commiserated - Felt sympathy or pity (for/with someone)

I nodded. “Something is being thrust upon us, Tony. I don’t understand it, but we’re meant to do something with this — something great, if Shakespeare is to be trusted.”

“I’ll tell you what I think,” Tony said, pushing his cup away. “Shakespeare was never meant to be read. That was your first mistake — turning it into a book. We’d do better to approach some film types...”

I raised my brows. “Feel free to march in and take over.”

“I’m not taking over. I’m simply applying a little real-world application — the perspective of a person with only a passing interest in Shakespeare. If we want to sell this, it has to be a movie.”

“There *have* been a lot of adaptations...” I agreed.

And that, dear reader, is where you find me.

This isn’t one of those neat stories where everyone falls in love and rides off into the sunset. I don’t even own a car. What would I ride?

Of course, I could tell you how I *hope* the story ends, with movie deals and love that makes parting such sweet sorrow. But Shakespeare put it so much better.

“We know what we are, but not what we may be.”

Isn’t that the truth.

Adaptations – The action or process of making a change suitable for a new purpose

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