Background  In September 2008, a large freshman class gathered on the campus of the Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, D.C., to begin their college careers. As happens every September, the university faculty greeted them in a convocation. That year, the highlight of the gathering was a speech delivered by English professor Michael Mack. Mack began “Why Read Shakespeare?” with a disclosure: as a Shakespeare scholar, he was hardly objective. Still, he noted, the value of reading Shakespeare must, from time to time, be articulated.

“Neither a borrower nor a lender be To be, or not to be—that is the question If you prick us, do we not bleed? Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears
Now is the winter of our discontent What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet Double, double toil and trouble; fire burn and cauldron bubble from Why Read Shakespeare?
Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once. Et tu, Brute? Parting is such sweet sorrow
O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo? The lady doth protest too much, methinks
Argument by Michael Mack

AS YOU READ Note each reason Mack provides to support his central argument that people should read Shakespeare.

If college is a time for asking questions, it also is a time for broadening your interests. Why should Shakespeare be one of those interests that you seek to develop at CUA? The obvious argument to the contrary is that reading Shakespeare is hard work—and not particularly rewarding, at least the first time round. I would like to begin by addressing what I take to be a perfectly honest response to a first reading of Shakespeare, namely “I don’t get it; is it really worth the effort?”

Let me try to explain by comparing Shakespeare to music. We all know that some kinds of music are easy on the ears. This is the ear candy that you like the very first time you hear it. And after you’ve heard it ten thousand times in twenty four hours, it turns into an ear worm that drives you crazy.

There also is music that you don’t particularly like the first time you hear it. But, if you give it a chance, it grows on you. And you discover something new about it every time you listen. At a certain point, if you listen enough, you realize that what seemed random is
really better described as “complex.” What had been annoying now
instead strikes you as appealingly edgy. And what initially seemed
weird now looks strangely wonderful. This is the way Shakespeare
works. He gives you a serious headache the first time you try to
understand him—and the second. But if you stick with him, you
can expect a breakthrough, and the excitement and satisfaction of
being able to say, “I get it.”

The first time you listen to a piece of complex music, you hear
but don’t hear. Why should it be any surprise, then, that the first
time people read Shakespeare they don’t get it? What would be
surprising—and a genuine cause for concern—would be if someone
read Shakespeare and thought they’d understood him.

This phenomenon of people having difficulty understanding
Shakespeare is hardly new. It predates by centuries our truncated
attention spans and our preference for the fast cuts of modern
video. It is a problem that the editors of the First Folio[1] addressed
in 1623, just seven years after the death of Shakespeare. The editors,
John Heminge and Henry Condell, were two of Shakespeare’s
fellow players and shareholders in the Globe.[2] Addressing the “great
variety of readers” of the volume, they wrote:

Read him, therefore; and again and again.
And if then you do not like him, surely
you are in some manifest danger, not to
understand him.

They did not expect readers to understand Shakespeare’s works
the first time they read them—and that’s why they recommend
rereading—“again and again.” They recognize that Shakespeare
is difficult, but they insist that he is worth the effort—and that if
someone doesn’t like Shakespeare, it’s their fault, not his.

A Time for Exploring

The question Heminge and Condell don’t answer—and the one
I still haven’t answered—is what you’ve understood when you’ve
understood Shakespeare. When you get “it,” what did you get?

I’d like to answer this by addressing in particular those who
just don’t see themselves as, well, the literary type. Some of you
out there are thinking, “Reading Shakespeare—that’s just not
me: I’m just a normal guy, and the simple pleasures are good
enough for me. Besides, what would my bowling buddies say?”
I can hear others out there thinking, “I’m in a professional school,
and I just want to get into my professional studies as quickly as
possible.” Still others are thinking, “I much prefer something more scientific—I believe in studying “real” things: fiction is fun to read on summer break, but . . .”

In response to these serious-minded objections to reading Shakespeare, I would like to suggest that what you find in Shakespeare is as serious as the subject matter of your other courses. We think of biology and chemistry, history and politics, psychology and sociology as subjects that are focused on the real world. Well, as with these subjects, Shakespeare offers us a lens on the real world in which we live.

In Shakespeare’s time, great books were thought of as mirrors. When you read a great book, the idea is, you are looking into a mirror—a pretty special mirror, one that reflects the world in a way that allows us to see its true nature. What is more, as we hold the volume of Shakespeare in front of us, we see that it reflects not only the world around us, but also ourselves. What is it that we find in Shakespeare? Nothing less than ourselves and the world—certainly worthy subjects to study in college.

Indeed, some of Shakespeare’s contemporaries justified the seriousness of literary fictions by pointing out that Christ Himself used them. Take the parable of the prodigal son;[3] in this fiction you learn about sin and forgiveness. And you also learn about yourself. You realize that the story is about you—you are the prodigal son. The problem is that you are not only the prodigal son but also the resentful, self-righteous older brother. As you interpret the
What is it that we find in Shakespeare? Nothing less than ourselves and the world.

parable, you find that it interprets you—and in multiple ways. As you discover the true meaning of the parable you discover the truth about yourself.

In the case of Macbeth, we have a supreme reflection of ambition. But what makes the play terrifying is not that Macbeth looks like a fascist dictator[4]—a popular staging these days—but because he looks like us. If you don’t see your own overreaching in the phantasmagoric restless ecstasy of Macbeth, you need to read again. Either you don’t understand the true nature of Macbeth’s ambition or you don’t know yourself. Or, quite possibly, both.

What we see in these examples is a fairly complex interplay of life and literature. Literature teaches you about life, and the better you understand literature, the better you understand life. It also is true, though, that the more you know about life, the better equipped you are to understand what you find in literature. This two-way mirroring means that learning about literature and learning about life go hand in hand. And it means that finding beauty and meaning in Shakespeare is a sort of proving ground for finding beauty and meaning in life.

Indeed, as you learn to read Shakespeare, you are learning to read the world. As you interpret Shakespeare’s characters, you are practicing figuring out life’s characters. Struggling with the complexities involved in interpreting Shakespeare is a superb preparation for struggling with the complexities of life. Shakespeare offers a world of vicarious experience—a virtual reality, a sort of
flight simulator—that gives you a great advantage when it comes
time to venture out into the real world.
So Shakespeare isn’t just for literary types, he is for anyone who
is interested in navigating the real world. . . .

There is Knowledge and there is Knowledge

As I conclude, I would like to remind you that college isn’t just
about your head, it’s also about the heart. And, returning to
Shakespeare, I can say that he can be particularly helpful in
understanding the heart. Read Shakespeare and spare yourself a
world of bad dates.

Shakespeare shows how the head and the heart need each other.
One of the most important things for you to come to understand
is your own emotional life. Why do you feel the way you do? Have
other people felt this way before? What have they done about it, and
how has it turned out?

By reading about the heart, your head and heart become more
fully integrated. This integrity, when you understand what you
feel and you hear with an understanding heart, is the mark of an
educated person. . . .

So, again, “Why read Shakespeare?” I’ve proposed a link
between getting to know Shakespeare and getting to know the
world and ourselves. I encourage you to test out this hypothesis
and to see if in becoming better at the art of reading Shakespeare,
you become better at the art of living—to see if through reading
Shakespeare you become someone better equipped to find
happiness in life, someone who more highly values what is truly
valuable in life.
Review Mack’s argument:

“Why Read Shakespeare?” is an argument in which the author attempts to persuade an audience to agree with his point of view. Michael Mack states a claim, or thesis, and supports it with valid reasoning and relevant evidence. He also makes these rhetorical choices, which appeal directly to his audience of college freshmen.

- The author directly addresses his audience’s potential concerns. “Some of you out there are thinking, ‘Reading Shakespeare—that’s just not me: I’m just a normal guy, and the simple pleasures are good enough for me. Besides, what would my bowling buddies say?’” How might this question appeal to his audience?

- The author uses comparisons that his audience will relate to. He begins the speech by comparing Shakespeare to music. What assumption is the author making about his audience by using this comparison?

- The author appeals directly to the audience’s self-interest. He explains that reading Shakespeare can ultimately help students understand matters of the heart: “Read Shakespeare and spare yourself a world of bad dates.”

Consider the following questions in order to review the article:

- Identify Why did Shakespeare’s contemporaries recommend rereading his works, and what might this information suggest to current readers?

- Infer Mack uses the term “ear candy” in line 11. What does he mean by this term? How might the term appeal to his audience?

- Cite Evidence What evidence does the author provide to support the claim that Shakespeare’s works reflect the world and ourselves?

- Analyze The author concludes the speech with a kind of challenge to his audience. Review lines 125–132, and then explain why he included this content.

Look up the definitions of the bolded vocabulary in the article, and review their meanings in context.