

A commentary on the effectiveness of the opening scene of Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The audience begins to understand the underlying or dominant ideas that make *A Man for All Seasons*, by their introduction in the very first scene of the play. The use of dialogue and action plays a notable role in the presentation of the characters, giving the audience an idea of their importance and purpose later. Furthermore, the significance of the goblet and the exploration of deception and corruption build tension and set the tone for what is to follow.

The entrance of Common Man in a “single spot of light” begins the play with a somber tone. A dark stage suggests secrecy and deception, where the audience is not started off on the play straightforward. This is important as it not only helps develop the atmosphere, but gives the audience and understanding of what to expect as the play progresses. A suspicious spot of light causes the audience to look closely at the scene, pay attention to detail on stage and expect trickery. The same tension is continued in the Common Man’s monologue, beginning with “perverse”- a strongly negative word conveying the nature of ideas that are brought up through the rest of the play.

Bolt uses the Common Man’s prologue to introduce the characters while already influencing the audience’s opinion of them. The play is put into context by reference to “Kings and Cardinals” setting a political scene. This only causes more tension and gives rise to the understanding of what is at stake, as these are characters that influence an entire nation. The audience is constantly reminded of the serious implications of this by the use of music in the play. This is seen in the trumpets blowing during a conversation

between Wolsey and More, reminding both the characters and the audience of the King's influence.

The negative atmosphere is carried through, consolidating what the audience already had a feeling about. The air of deception and pretentiousness is portrayed vividly by the use of description of the characters, having "embroidered mouths", fancy, but all a facade. It creates a lack of trust, which was introduced to them having "speaking costumes", meaning donning a mask to suit the moment, without being genuine. It is also ironic coming from the mouth of the Common Man because, through the play he is seen to be changing costumes as the situation befits. This indicates that although ingenuity is to be despised it is human nature and necessary for survival. It is a theme that rings crucial in the play as we see More does not adapt to his situations, whereas everyone else can, for survival.

"Speaking costumes" has yet another implication, and that is presenting the question of who the real man for all seasons is. One interpretation is that a man for all seasons is someone who can adapt in order to survive all the seasons. This is supported by the fact that Bolt uses "a" man as opposed to "the man". A man for all seasons doesn't have, or simply put value on individuality, rather he can blend in, he is any man, a man in the crowd. As Common Man says "all the centuries" are the centuries of a common man. The morality of it is reinforced as he says this immediately after taking a drink of More's wine, stealing, and being deceptive after.

On the other hand, the Common Man's references to these themes are somewhat light. In his using "stuff" in the context of liturgical things, Bolt presents a crucial matter rather lightly. This brings in the satirical element of the play. The mockery of society in the play is a rather important aspect to it, being an undercurrent portrayed more specifically at events like the King visiting More. The man on whom the fate of England rests, the King, acts like a child. It is also seen in Roper's ignorance of the dangerous potential consequences of being a heretic and treating it much like a simple matter of changing costume.

The Common Man also serves as a foil to bring out the character of More as being benevolent. More's response to being lied to and deceived is "mild". In his asking whether the wine was good, the audience understands that he is observant, a characteristic seen in More, on more than one occasion but also that he does not let his superiority make him arrogant, another area More is differentiated from the other characters in the play.

This depiction of More as being an outsider is also seen in his interaction with Rich, who is antagonistic. At the mention of suffering buying man, More gets "interested", in hope of having a profound debate, whereas Rich is being superficial. The disappointment seen in More is found through the play, and he is often misunderstood, with regard to his actions not only by Chapuys, but his wife, and his best friend, Norfolk too.

The clash in character between Rich and More is significant to the understanding of both and the themes tied to them. The former is a representation of corruption, as his progress through the play marks the

developments in corruption, seen in him wearing a nice gown later and , finally, a chain of office, paid for with his soul. This is established in the opening line “ every man has his price”, suggesting a belief in bribery and a lack of virtue. This is relevant later in the play, when Cromwell urged him deeper into the path of corruption and Rich exclaims, “ I’ve lost my innocence”, taking the audience back to this moment, where it is clear that he never was really innocent.

Finally, the extract concludes significantly with more building of tension, that serves to create an atmosphere for the introduction of Cromwell. In More taking Rich and walking with him, a change of tone is brought about. More transitions from the gently impatient character to a little more serious, with a hint of concern for Rich. The situation is made more uncomfortable in Rich laughing a “ fraction” too long, indicating awkwardness, a lack of confidence, and unease. In conclusion, Bolt jumps right into the portrayal of characters, their relationships and significance at the start of the play, serving as an indication of its fast paced nature. The major themes of the play are introduced, as in the setting, by the use of stage directions and underlying emotions. Therefore the audience understands tone, the context, characters and their intentions, in anticipation of whatever action centers the play.