

Understanding william shakespeare's works



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This author believes that the ability to understand and appreciate the true meaning of a literary piece hinges mainly on one's skill to fill in the missing pieces and to connect the dots. Ways to understand a piece may be done either internally or externally.

To internally understand something requires separating the piece into fragments and building the same piece by combining these fragments and treating them like one big jigsaw puzzle. On the other hand, to externally analyze a piece necessitates the use of external factors which helped the author write his work. This includes the author's background and the economic and political situations he faced during his time. Externally understanding a piece, however, can prove to be difficult especially when there is dearth of information about the writer or his time. Imagery Thus, scholars have devised a means to internally comprehend works of art by understanding the author's use of imagery. Imagery refers to the use of mental images evoked through figurative languages employed by the author which may be intentionally or unintentionally done (Webster's New Encyclopedic Dictionary, def.

2 & 3). These imageries can be any language i. e. figures of speech like similes, metaphors, personification, etc. which appeals to the audience's sense of sight, touch, smell, hearing, and taste to help the latter create a picture in their heads (" Imagery," Wikipedia, par. 1).

Likewise, imageries are like clues found in the language itself which helps one to understand, not only the literary piece, but also the background of the author and the time the piece was written (" Spurgeon," Wikipedia, par. 4).

This paper, henceforth, centers on William Shakespeare's use of imagery in several of his Tragedy plays — particularly, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.

It is necessary to emphasize however, that the use of recurrent images is prevalent in Shakespeare's tragedies to raise, develop, sustain and repeat emotions from the audience (Spurgeon, n/a). *Romeo and Juliet* The prevailing imageries in this play are light and fate. Spurgeon commented that the use of light dominated *Romeo and Juliet* as light is found in every form and manifestation possible i. e. the sun, moon, stars, fire, lightning, the flash of gunpowder, and the reflected light of beauty and of love (50).

' Likewise, its opposite, is depicted visibly through the use of ' night, darkness, clouds, rain, mist and smoke' (ibid). For example in several portions of the play, Shakespeare uses light to show and impart to the audience Romeo's feelings towards Juliet. Thus in Act I, Scene V, Lines 43-49, Romeo likens Juliet's beauty with the sun: " O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright! It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear; Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!" Also in Act II, Scene II, Lines 4-8, Romeo compares Juliet's beauty with that of the moon: " But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon, Who is already sick and pale with grief, That thou her maid art far more fair than she." . Shakespeare also used light to depict motion — particularly the romance of *Romeo and Juliet*.

A case in point is the statement made by Friar Laurence in Act II Scene VI, whereby he compares the romance of Romeo and Juliet with fireworks — causing immediate happiness, but nevertheless, ends so drastic: “[t]hese violent delights have violent ends And in their triumph die, like fire and powder.”; Also with the use of imagery, as the play unfolds, Shakespeare is able to remind the audience of the bleak situation the lovers are in: “The grey-eyed morn smiles on the frowning night, Chequering the eastern clouds with streaks of light, And fleckled darkness like a drunkard reels From forth day’s path and Titan’s fiery wheels (Friar Lawrence; 2. 3. 1-4).”; These lines mean that the fates of the two lovers are uncertain like clouds with only a few streaks of hope (light).

The statement also acts as a foreshadowing of what is to become of Romeo and Juliet as Shakespeare warns that danger lays ahead for the lovers. The famous chorus of the play also uses imagery of fate or foreshadowing as the audience is constantly reminded of what will happen in the future: “In fair Verona, where we lay our scene, From ancient grudge break to new mutiny, Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean. From forth the fatal loins of these two foes A pair of star-cross’d lovers take their life; (Prologue)” The use of these imageries, the author believes, is very effective in setting the tone and pace of the play which made it entirely unique and appealing. Without these, Romeo and Juliet would just be relegated to a mere ordinary love story. Julius Caesar (1599) Charney, in her book *Shakespeare’s Roman Plays*, espouses that the chief image themes in this play are the storm and its portent, blood and fire (42). She adds that the storm and its portents reflect the images of conspiracy and tyranny.

Blood and fire, on the other hand, suggests assassination and civil strife (Id). This imagery of tempest or storm is clearly shown in Shakespeare's stage directions. Shakespeare deliberately instructs in the manuscript that upon the opening of Act I, scene III, there should be "thunder and lightning" (id, 43). More so, according to Charney, the lines thereafter showing a strife or storm in heaven, mirrors an impending conflict on earth (id, 44-44), thus: "I have seen tempests, when the scolding windsHave rived the knotty oaks, and I have seenThe ambitious ocean swell and rage and foam, To be exalted with the threatening clouds: But never till to-night, never till now, Did I go through a tempest dropping fire. Either there is a civil strife in heaven, Or else the world, too saucy with the gods, Incenses them to send destruction (Casca)." It is relevant to note that these instructions on the play of thunders are, in fact, recurring since it is found in two other parts of the play —i.

e. in the closing of Act II, scene I, and in Act I, scene III line 100, where the thunders should be still (id, 43). The imagery of blood, on the other hand, plays an important role in heightening the significance of Julius Caesar's death (id, 48). Charney speculates that Shakespeare may have wished to portray Caesar's death as a sign of purification and new life — similar to the Rome's tradition of blood-letting (48).

Blood also symbolizes guilt and inner conflict working its way in the mind of Brutus, hence: "[I]et us be sacrificers, but not butchers, Caius. We all stand up against the spirit of Caesar; And in the spirit of men there is no blood: O, that we then could come by Caesar's spirit, And not dismember Caesar! But, alas, Caesar must bleed for it!(2. 1. 166-71(49)."; Another imagery used in the play is fire which symbolizes passion and its ability to enflame; and

destruction and purification (Charney, 60). Shakespeare's use of imageries is very helpful in setting the atmosphere of the play.

Frequent use of thunders is effective in arousing the senses of the audience by stirring up anxiety, terror and darkness from them. Further, the use of blood and its constant mention in the characters' lines show how important Caesar's death is in the whole plot. In fact, this shedding of blood, which has set the play in motion, is also the means used by Shakespeare to end it by the killing of Brutus. Macbeth (1606) Frequent images used in this play are blood and clothing.

Spurgeon believes that the use of blood in the play " increases the feelings of fear, horror, and pain (20)." In fact, in Act II, Scene I, when Macbeth hallucinates and sees a dagger, he says: " I see thee still, And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood, Which was not so before."; These same lines are actually a foreboding that Macbeth shall kill the king using a dagger showing Macbeth's subconscious intent to kill the latter in order to take his throne. Thus, in an attempt to fulfill his own destiny of becoming the king of Scotland, Macbeth indeed kills the king and conspires with his wife to frame the guards for the killing.

The use of the word ' blood' in Lady Macbeth's lines shows guilt, which is rooted from her participation in the king's killing. This is found in Act V, Scene V, thus: "[o]ut, damned spot! out, I say!-One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.-Hell is murky!-Fie, mylord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power toaccount?-Yet who would have thought the old manto have had so much blood in him (Lady

Macbeth).”; The said lines also clearly shows how agitated Lady Macbeth is when she was stained by blood.

In fact, she took time washing her hands to purge herself from the killing. In addition, Shakespeare, through the use of clothing, gives a picture on how ill-fitted Macbeth's clothes are with him — symbolizing that Macbeth is not fit to be in his position. For example, Macbeth utters: “[t]he thane of Cawdor lives: why do you dress me in borrow'd robes?” (Act II, Scene II).” This also shows Macbeth's attempt in futility to hide himself from all his wrong doings by cloaking himself of power. This, however, will not suffice as people see through him.

Thus, Angus describes Macbeth's clothes as: “[n]ow does he feel His secret murders sticking on his hands; Now minutely revolts upbraid his faith-breach; Those he commands move only in command, Nothing in love: now does he feel his title Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe Upon a dwarfish thief.” (Act V, Scene II)”; Verily, the use of blood in Macbeth is essential in showing the gravity of Macbeth and his wife's actions and the effect of such in their beings. Likewise, the use of ill-fitted clothing is useful in clearly describing Macbeth's position and his feelings about it.; Antony and Cleopatra (1607-1608) Scope and dimension as imageries are used to signify the “ hyperbolical” state of the play (Charney, 79). Dimension or size took the form of cosmic references i.

e. earth, heaven, sun and moon (id, 80). For example, when Caesar declared his willingness to scavenge the whole world just to find a “ hoop” to bind himself to Antony (id, 84): “[y]et if I knew What hoop should hold us stanch,

from edge to edge O' the world I would pursue it (2. 2. 117-18)," — this effectively showed Caesar's strong affection towards Antony.

The same use of magnitude or boundless description is found in Antony's lines when he replied to Cleopatra '[t]hen must thou needs find out new heaven, new earth" after being asked by Cleopatra how much Antony loves her (Cummings, par. 4). Also, in the latter part of the play, the sheer size of Cleopatra's sorrow is described as: "[a]ll strange and terrible events are welcome, But comforts we despise; our size of sorrow, Proportion'd to our cause, must be as great As that which makes it 4. 15.

3-6(id, 80)."; These lines clearly show the intensity of the emotions flooding Cleopatra at that point in time. Another imagery prevalent in the play is the use of serpent. A serpent symbolizes the creation and a dark force (Sagar, 2).

The use of the word serpent is, in fact, found in Cleopatra's own lines: "[h]e's speaking now, Or murmuring ' Where's my serpent of old Nile?' For so he calls me (Act I Scene III)."; The use of serpent by Shakespeare to describe Cleopatra, perhaps, alludes to the biblical passage on the creation — wherein a serpent lured Adam to commit a sin by offering him something delightful (apple). Cleopatra's character is thus similar to that of the serpent in such a way that Cleopatra constantly uses her beauty and charm to lure Antony away from Rome. Similar success on the use of imagery is achieved in this play. Though, the play is quite complicated for an average person due to its theme, the use of serpent and size are enough to help the audience relate to the themes that revolved in the play. Conclusion; The use of vivid imagery to

describe the emotions being felt by the characters, to evoke feelings from the audience and to enable the latter to relate to the scenario may be regarded as one of Shakespeare's unique style in playwriting.

Shakespeare's play of imagery is beyond aesthetic since imagery played an important role in making the lines rich and meaningful. More so, since the symbols have universal meaning and thus withstand time, the audience of today is still able to understand the context and meaning of Shakespeare's plays.;