

The symbol of the roman body politic



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One dominant idea that is recurrent throughout *Titus Andronicus* is the symbolism of the 'body of Rome', which acts as a metaphorical parallel to the events of the text. This motif follows the changing statuses of the characters and power structures within the play and emphasises the downfall of the Roman Empire. The play follows the leader of the Roman army, Titus Andronicus, and his struggle for power after corruption within the empire's ruling force. Despite the text extrinsically focussing on Rome it also presents ideas about the English monarchy of the Elizabethan era. The incompleteness of the body in the first act can be labelled as the defining factor in the events of the play and the cause of the eventual crumble of the empire, furthered by the continual severing of body parts and bloodshed.

The body of Rome metaphor present in *Titus Andronicus* demonstrates the tearing apart of Rome's body politic by power imbalances and civil unrest.

The exposition of the play is paralleled by the motifs used in *Titus Andronicus*, which also explain the rise and downfall of the central characters and thus the Empire. The 'body of Rome', more importantly the head of this body symbol emphasises the gravity of the events that take place through its constantly changing depiction and link back to the motif. At the beginning of Shakespeare's first revenge tragedy Titus is asked to undertake the position of Emperor of Rome and in a sense "help to set a head on headless Rome." This pivotal point in the play demonstrates a promise of restoration of order and a prosperous future, however, this is quickly deteriorated by Titus' refusal and handover of power to Saturninus, the previous emperor's eldest son. As Titus was the people's preferred leader the power he has vested in Saturninus is felt to be illegitimate and unlawful, rapidly proven by

the unfolding events in the remainder of the text. The head is the most vital branch of the body motif, reiterated by the immediate demise of the rest of the body politic. The relation of a chief authority figure links back to the context of the time of publication and Queen Elizabeth's monarchist rule over England. The importance of a 'head' on Rome, which is revealed as the empire continues to crumble as the plot progresses, reinforces the necessity of the power structures of the 16th century. The first act of the play sets the stage for the unfolding occurrences, made obvious to the audience through the use of the parallel body symbol.

The power imbalance and beheading of Rome resulting from act one in the text continues to cause repercussions that are continually reflected in the body motif. The frequent dismembering of body parts is a figurative maintenance of the disintegration of the Roman body politic and promise of a fall from grace of a majority of the central characters. Titus Andronicus contains nearly eighty mentions of hands and frequent relations to the tongue, highlighting the importance of these body parts in relation to the body metaphor as a whole. After Titus first sees his daughter Lavinia after her rape and mutilation by the unlawful leaders of Rome, Chiron and Demetrius, sans a tongue and hands, he states that this is fortunate, as his hands' service to Rome had revealed itself to be futile and fruitless: "Tis well, Lavinia, that thou hast no hands;/ For hands to do Rome service is but vain." In this scene hands are used as a symbol of physical effort, which when given to the empire gives nothing in return. This break down of the body motif is sustained through the decapitation of two of Titus' sons, an event which he is manipulated into believing to be preventable through the

cutting off of his own hand. This again reflects the ineffectiveness of dedication to the state, and on a symbolic level the intertwined nature of the body politic. The numerous relations to body parts, largely hands, remind the audience of the crumbling state of the Roman Empire in Titus Andronicus.

The resolution of Titus Andronicus happens amongst the aftermath of the climatic scene and gives the audience assurance of restoration of the former glory of the Roman Empire. Again, this information is presented through the use of the body motif, which, after falling apart through its figurative ‘murder’, is guaranteed to have the ability to be returned to its former power and strength. The climax of the text takes place as a banquet held by Titus for the emperor and empress of Rome. This scene sees Tamora, the empress who has exacted her revenge on Titus throughout the course of the play, unintentionally eat her own sons: “ Why there they are, both bakèd in this pie, / Whereof their mother daintily hath fed, / Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred.” After this final act of vengeance Titus kills his daughter Lavinia, who he sees as already dead after losing her chastity, tongue and hands, stabs Tamora, and then proceeds to be murdered by Saturninus, which is followed rapidly by this act being avenged by Titus’ only remaining son, Lucius. This slaughter results in a decrease in the number of remaining central characters, including the key holders of power, with the exception of Lucius, Aaron and Marcus, the latter of which promises to correct the actions of the former leaders that resulted in the demise of the empire, linking this to the body motif used frequently in the play: “ O let me teach you how to knit again / This scattered corn into one mutual sheaf, / These broken limbs again into one body.” This speech ties together the repercussions of the

conflicts in the play by suggesting that the broken-apart body politic can be reassembled into what it was before. The final scene of the play links the resolution to the body politic, implying that both this and on a literal level, the crumbled empire, can be returned to their former state.

The use of a recurring motif in a text can further the audience's comprehension of the gravity of key events in the relation to the plot as a whole. Titus Andronicus, amongst other symbols, uses the idea of the body politic to reinforce the consequences of character decisions, focussing on different features as the play goes on in order to demonstrate the disintegration of the body politic due to civil unrest. The head is used to represent the ruler of the Roman Empire and the pivotal nature of Titus' rejection of the title. Following this occurrence the rest of the body follows in suit, slowly breaking down parallel to the dissolving state of the Roman Empire. With the resolution of the play comes a promise of a remedy for Rome and a re-joining of its symbolic body parts. These aspects combine together to form a single fluid comparison of the key events and provide a higher level of plot presentation to the audience, following it steadily from the exposition, focussing on the head of the body metaphor, through the central conflict using repetition of the hand motif and finally to the resolution which demonstrates assurance of complete resolve after the crumble of the Roman Empire and its corresponding body politic.

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