An examination of imagery across genres: the tragedy and the epic

ASSIGN BUSTER

A tool consistently employed by the Greeks was that of imagery, and within the genre of tragedy and the epic they have demonstrated their mastery of the device. Imagery within tragedy adds a necessary and otherwise unattainable sub-story to the play through symbolism, while within the epic it enables the reader to fully comprehend the text with thorough description. The Oresteia, for instance, is flooded with symbolic imagery. Within the first two plays, The Agamemnon and The Libation Bearers, such visual and tactile language serves several purposes. There are multiple ways in which it adds depth, the first being a sense of the severity that it lends to the curse on the House of Atreus. It specifically accomplishes this aim with the ubiquitous image of blood; throughout both plays the reader understands that blood is inextricably-and appropriately-linked with this cycle of murder. " From him deep in the nerve is given the love and the blood drunk, that before the old wound dries, it bleeds again (emphasis added)," (Agamemnon, 1477-80) Clytaemestra claims after she murders Agamemnon; she is quite obviously referring to the power of the cycle of violence that claims her family. This insight also surfaces in The Libation Bearers, where the Chorus laments, " Through too much glut of blood drunk by our fostering ground the vengeful gore is caked and hard…swarming infection boils within" (LB, 66-70). This is a stunningly lucid piece of imagery that fully relays both the historical reality of this curse and its dire consequences. Such visual language conveys the curse's absolute inescapability and destructiveness-this rich imagery is essential for the reader to understand the full brutality of this cycle of death. Imagery also works to reveal Clytaemestra's true character through the symbolism of the often-mentioned net. The connotations of the net-entrapment and deceit-illuminate her genuine nature before she exposes it

herself. Within her first address she says “ Had [he] taken all the wounds the tale whereof was carried home to me, he had been cut full of gashes like a fishing net” (Aga, 866-8); this introduces the symbol. Later, her malice is more evident, as she lays tapestries for her husband’s arrival (which visually picks up on the theme of the laid net) that efficiently parallels the entrapment of her scheme: “ Strew the ground before his feet with tapestries…a crimson path” (Aga, 911). As demonstrated by this statement, Clytaemestra’s veiled intentions echo the veiled conflict of The Agamemnon; although Clytaemestra’s antagonism is kept hidden, it slips through the cracks of dialogue in the form of potent symbolism: the act of laying the bloodred tapestries is an ominous portent that betrays Clytaemestra’s malicious mindset. The fluidity of symbolism can be observed within the net imagery, as it easily transforms itself-into a noose, snake, or robes-all while maintaining its meaning of entrapment. The imagery in The Eumenides is similarly involved. The surface story-Orestes’ sentencing-is simply a distraction from the complex underlying conflict: the power struggle between the Erinyes and the Olympian gods, elucidated, of course, by imagery. This device at first lends an insight into the Erinyes’ perspective: “ The hunted beast has slipped clean from our nets and gone” (147). In addition to providing a unification of the three books with the mention of the net, this piece of imagery establishes the feeling of being ‘ cheated’ that the Erinyes feel not only in respect to Orestes, but in response to the shifting deistic power balance. It is this more subtle power struggle that is the deeper meaning of the text, but without the light and dark imagery within the play it would be challenging to entirely grasp. The Erinyes describe themselves as “ spurned, outcast from gods, driven apart to stand in light not from the sun”

(E, 385-6), and often make references to darkness: “ Night, hear me, o Night, mother” (E, 845). They are thus established as a ‘ dark’ power, coming into conflict with the Olympian deities ‘ light’ power-this light/dark conflict reflects the gods’ power struggle. They argue for what they claim is their rightful authority over familial murder: “ So the immortals must hold hands off, nor is there one who shall sit at our feasting. For sheer white robes I have no right and no portion” (E, 347-52). They are arguing for the separation of authority; just as they do not presume to hold power in Olympian matters (signaled by the “ sheer white robes”), they should be the only authority in matters of family conflict-their own ‘ earthly matters.’ This is especially apparent in a following piece of imagery: “ Men’s illusions in their pride under the sky melt down, and are diminished into the ground, gone before the onset of our black robes, pulsing our vindictive feet against them” (E, 386-71). One can imagine the authority ‘ melting’ from the sky (echoing the ‘ dripping blood’ image from Agamemnon and Libation Bearers which tied in with the very same subject: cyclical familial murder) and reaching the ground, which is the domain of the Furies. Their imagery-sated argument provides a firm resonance to their expressed fear of losing their authority in the divine world altogether. Lastly, imagery provides a conclusion to the cycle of murder presented in the previous books. References that recall the ‘ dripping blood’ from Libation Bearers and Agamemnon, such as “ the vindictive poison dripping deadly out of my heart upon the ground” (E, 782-4) or “ spill the dripping rain of death” (E, 802)-the latter of which directly recalls Clytaemestra’s speech following the death of Agamemnon-instantly pulls one back into the mindset of the cyclical murders. It is within this final chapter, however, that this cycle is resolved; the dark, bloodied imagery of

the Erinyes gives way to the light, benevolent imagery of the Eumenides: faced with “ luminous evidence of Zeus” (E, 797), they are offered “ a place of [their] own…with shining chairs” (E, 804-6). The light imagery continues with the Furies’ eventual response: “ I speak this prayer for them that the sun’s bright magnificence shall break out wave on wave of all the happiness life can give” (E, 921-5). The light has overcome the dark and bloody; the curse of Atreus has been resolved. The play’s imagery has thus effectively conveyed the course of true events more clearly than the dialogue itself. Sophocles’ Antigone also represents an incorporation of imagery. Within the text, ‘ living corpse’ imagery exists to provide an insight to Antigone’s psyche, especially when one considers the implications of Antigone essentially being buried alive in, in her own words, a “ tomb, bridal chamber, prison forever” (E, 891). When one recalls an earlier thought of Antigone’s-“ It will be good to die, doing so. I shall lie by his side, loving him…forever” (A, 72-76)-this symbol is, however disturbingly, illuminated, tying in both her desire for death in order to be with her family and her family’s tradition of incest. Another prevalent piece of imagery is that of the dust of the earth and the moisture of Polyneices’ body. “ We brushed off all the dust that lay upon the dead man’s body, heedfully leaving it moist and naked” (A, 408-10). The connotations of this moisture have several meanings; there is an implicit attachment of the moisture of his body and the libations poured by Antigone (“[Antigone] brought thirsty dust to the body; from a shapely brazen urn…poured a triple stream of funeral offerings; and crowned the corpse” (A, 430-3)). The phrase “ thirsty dust” appears several times throughout the play (for example at lines 248 and 430)-this suggests the ‘ thirst’ of the earth itself for the death of Oedipus’ family members, inflicted

by the curse on his line; only death can quench such a thirst. The Oresteia and Antigone by virtue of their symbolic imagery emerge as complex and multi-layered works-the interplay of images and symbols grant it a multi-faceted significance that surfaces in each book. In each play, a story of sorts is created solely out of the imagery that glimmers beneath the surface dialogue. Imagery within a different genre-the epic-serves quite another purpose. Here, it is not symbolic imagery that is emphasized, but rather elaborate description. As opposed to a sub-story, imagery within epics serves to clarify the events of the surface-and only-story. Within epics, the reader is often given a sketch of an event; the imagery provided fills in the specific detail. Fittingly, the execution of imagery within epics is also very different from that of tragedy. This is best observed within Homer’s The Iliad, where tertium comparationis runs rampant in the form of the simile. Each instance of simile, though seemingly redundant, precisely describes the less tangible components of a situation; as the text sets up the situation (generally warrior/s from the Greek army attacking warrior/s from the Trojan army), the imagery fills in the emotional nuances-the aggression, fear, and predatory instincts of each party within each unique conflict. A fitting example of such simile can be found in Book Sixteen: “ So these lords of the Danaans killed each his own man. They as wolves make havoc among lambs or young goats in their fury, catching them out of the flocks, when the sheep separate in the mountains through the thoughtlessness of the shepherd, and the wolves seeing them suddenly snatch them away, and they have no heart for fighting; so the Danaans ravaged the Trojans” (XVI, 351-7). What helps to define this imagery-like all the similes in the poem-is it’s setting: Patroclus, wearing Achilleus’ armor, is turning the tide of the battle to favor the

Achaians. The animal characterization of Trojans as separated sheep perfectly encapsulates their terrified confusion in the face of this horrifying threat, and they quickly lose spirit. The characterization of a wolf on the part of the Greeks, however, represents the renewal of determination of their army; they are newly characterized as sly, threatening predators, when just pages ago they were described as decidedly less menacing " cattle…of a great marsh pasture" (XV, 630-1). A third element to this simile is the " thoughtless shepherd"-this communicates that the Trojan leader, Hektor, has failed to sufficiently rally his troops: the imagery places partial blame on Hektor for the disordered scattering of the troops-he is not doing his duty to protect them. Similes of this type occur time and again in The Iliad, but each under their own set of distinct circumstances. Though they are often strictly animal characterizations of warlike activity, this is not always the case. For example, " The Myrmidons came streaming out like wasps at the wayside when little boys have got into the habit of making them angry by always teasing them as they live in their house by the roadside; silly boys, they do something that hurts many people" (XVI, 259-63). The imagery of the Myrimdons as wasps provides a perfect image of the soldiers pouring out of their tents as if a solid mass, instead of individual warriors-their bodies actually seem one body, and their spirits all share the same fury. This simile also offers its own perspective regarding the war itself; by characterizing Paris as the " little boys"-thoughtless and self-indulgent-this piece of imagery is actually placing the full blame of the war on Paris himself (" silly boys, they do something that hurts many people"). In this way the simile provides not only meticulous detail regarding the sentiments of a particular event, but also gives insight into the war itself-where the action of The Iliad is the

story’s skeleton, the imagery provides the meat: the description necessary to wholly understand the poem’s progression. The Odyssey, Homer’s other famed epic, also uses imagery to clarify elements of the story itself. Odysseus himself provides a bulk of the imagery present in the poem, in order to better communicate his story to the Phiakians (and the reader). Imagery within his retelling of his journeys is essential, as no one has experienced the foreign lands that Odysseus has-he therefore employs rich sensory language when describing such places: “ In the forest glen [my men] came on the house of Circe. It was in an open place, well-polished, and all about it were lions…waving their long tails and fawning…They stood there in the forecourt of the goddess with the glorious hair, and heard Circe singing in a sweet voice as she went up and down a great design on a loom, immortal such as goddesses have, delicate and lovely and glorious their work” (IX, 210-25). This level of description, in contrast to simply stating the facts-the men’s arrival at the house of a goddess-are truly necessary not only for Odysseus’ audience (the Phiakians), but Homer’s as well. One cannot fully understand the journey of Odysseus without these details, and one cannot access these details sans imagery. Odysseus’ descriptive imagery continues with his painting of Skylla: “ In that cavern Skylla lives, whose howling is terror. Her voice is only as loud as a new-born puppy could make, but she herself is an evil monster…She has twelve feet, and all of them wave in the air. She has six necks upon her, grown to great length, and upon each neck there is a horrible head, with teeth in it, set in three rows close together and stiff, full of black death” (XII, 85-93). Without such a description of Skylla-or Charybdis, the Cyclops, Sirens, and Lotus-Eaters-not only would Odysseus’ survival been decidedly less impressive, but his journey, and the

story itself, would not have been nearly as monumental. It is the imagery of the storytelling that makes this text epic-the imagery that propels Odysseus' voyage from standard to grand, and from mundane to fantastic.