

# The opening scenes of shakespeare's plays essay sample

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In order for us to look closely at the opening scenes of Shakespeare's plays, it is first necessary to look at the period in which they were written. The theatres and audiences that Shakespeare wrote his plays for also have to be taken into account. Even to modern audiences, with access to new age technology, Shakespeare's plays are still extraordinarily effective and have stood the test of time remarkably well, but to 16th century audiences they were the best form of entertainment around. The theatre of the 16th century had developed from the courtyards of inns.

Prior to the time of William Shakespeare, theatres, in the modern sense of the word simply did not exist in England, travelling players would go from town to town performing in castles, mansions and stately homes, but more often than not they would perform in inn courtyards. The Globe, Shakespeare's theatre was modelled on these inn courtyards. Just like a courtyard it had three levels, the main stage, and the first and second balcony. There were doors on the stage for entrances and exits and a trap door.

The trap door symbolically represented Hell and characters that were thought to be evil or associated with Satan would come onto the stage through the trap door. Similarly the higher the level the more it would be associated with Heaven. The purpose built theatres allowed the stage to become the focus of the whole building and its audience, something that was extremely difficult to do in an inn courtyard. All these advantages of a purpose built theatre allowed Shakespeare to stage events such as battles

and riots. The backstage area could be used to make sound effects, which would enhance the realism of such scenes.

Despite the advantages a purpose built theatre had over an inn courtyard Shakespeare faced many physical challenges in an Elizabethan theatre that aren't present in a modern theatre. The Elizabethan theatre had no roof and therefore was open to the elements, rain, wind, and snow etc. Another problem that Shakespeare had to contend with was how to silence his audience and get them to pay attention to the play. In a modern day theatre the lights would be dimmed, this could obviously not be done in the 16th century, Shakespeare had no lights and no recorded sound although it was possible for music to be played.

The best way to achieve the audience's attention was to use dramatic impact in the opening scene. The Globe audience would range from highly educated scholars, who would be looking for the literary technique and style, right down to the common people, or groundlings, who would be interested mostly in the sex and violence. Shakespeare's plays had to be written so as to appeal to everyone, and he was largely successful in this. His plays were written in iambic pentameter, which the scholars and educated men in the audience could appreciate.

The upper classes and the scholars tended to be much easier to quieten down than the groundlings. These groundlings loved witchcraft, gossip and royal affairs. Shakespeare used this popular interest to grab the whole audience's attention. Scenes of violence were particularly well received by

all classes. Many of Shakespeare's plays have, an often subtle, political level, which would pass many by, but would be apparent to the monarch and the members of the court. The opening of Macbeth is very dramatic by the very nature of its subject matter, witches.

Witchcraft today is a dramatic subject, but in the days of Shakespeare witchcraft was unbelievably dramatic, and indeed quite shocking. In those days it was not a question of believing in witchcraft, it just simply did exist. The law testified to the existence of witchcraft. Greymalkin is mentioned in the opening scene of Macbeth. Greymalkin is a witch's familiar, the audience would have known this and most probably have feared it. Even given the restrictions of the Globe there were many effects that Shakespeare would have used.

Costume and sound effects were both used to create a big opening impact. Men, probably heavily made up always played the witches, and this would have enhanced the impact. Although the opening scene of Macbeth is very short, the verse makes it possible to extend the scene using dance, music and audience participation. The verse lends itself to chanting and is very rhythmical and regular and also rhyming. This enhances the feeling of evil. The witches then set the scene for the rest of the play, which would grab the audience's attention, if the rest of the scene hadn't already.

All in all the opening scene of Macbeth is a very, very powerful opening scene, especially for the time in which it was written. The scene is rounded off with all three witches chanting the rhyming couplet, which signals the

end of the scene. The last two lines, the rhyming couplet also use alliteration, to once again enhance the feeling of evil: " Fair is foul and foul is fair Hover through the fog and filthy air" King James I, who was himself Scottish, was fanatically interested in witchcraft and this was widely known.

Macbeth was wrote by Shakespeare to impress James and create a good impression with the new monarch, whose patronage Shakespeare would rely on. This is the reason why Macbeth is not historically accurate. Shakespeare took the facts and warped them to make James ancestors appear favourable and his ancestors' enemies unfavourable and indeed influenced by the Devil himself. James' royal house was connected to Banquo and Macduff, two heroines of the story. James was most probably the reason that the play was centred on witchcraft.

The effects that could be used, smoke, the sound of thunder, the dancing and chanting of the witches all add up to a brilliant opening scene. It would have been a most effective way to quieten the audience, who would have been shocked and awed into silence. Immediately preceding Act 1 Scene 1 of Romeo and Juliet is the prologue, which grabs the audience's attention straight away, by giving the basic plot of the play away. The last line of the prologue says that if you have missed anything that has been said pay attention and the actors will try and put that right: What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend. "

The prologue can be said in soothing or dramatic tones and sets the scene for either the violence of the play or the overall sadness, depending on the

way it is read. Act 1 Scene 1 opens with a hugely violent spectacle. Everyone in the audience, but especially by the common spectator loved violence. The tribal element and the gang warfare appealed greatly to popular imagination, and in fact still does. The scene can, and has been placed effectively in a modern setting. The first scene of Romeo and Juliet is crammed with sexual innuendo: 'Tis true, and therefore women being the weaker Vessels are ever thrust to the wall; therefore I will push Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the Wall. " " Me they shall feel while I am able to stand and 'tis Known I am a pretty piece of flesh. "

" My naked weapon is out: quarrel I will back thee. " The groundlings would have absolutely loved these lines, with their comical elements, as well as their sexual ones. Many of the lines in the first scene of Romeo and Juliet have a double-entendre, or double meaning, lines such as this one of Sampson's are examples of this: 'Tis all one. I will show myself a tyrant: when I have Fought with the men, I will be civil with the maids, I will cut Off their heads. " The obvious meaning of Sampson's line in reference to the maids, or women is that he will decapitate them, but in the language of the day it could also be taken as meaning taking the virginity of the maids. Once the prince comes on and reads his proclamation, the mood and atmosphere are set for the rest of the play. Shakespeare used the dramatic opening scenes of his plays to create affect and set the scene for the rest of the play.

In the opening scenes of both Macbeth and Romeo and Juliet, the opening scene gives you a strong sense of the main theme of the play. In Macbeth this is witchcraft and in Romeo and Juliet it is the feud between the house of

montague and the house of Capulet. Shakespeare was amazingly ahead of his time and he advanced the art of play writing and production many steps. This man was far superior to any playwright that had come before him or indeed that came after him, the opening scenes of his plays are testimony to this.