

Shakespeare's brilliant use of symbolism



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"To be or not to be - that is the question" (Kittredge, 993). This is one of William Shakespeare's best known and used quotes. Many who use it do not even know what piece it is taken from, or what exactly it means. It just sounds like a cool, tragic, Shakespearean quote to use to sound more intelligent.

And that is the sad truth. Shakespeare's works are filled with quotes, soliloquies, and experts, like this one, that are filled with innuendos, imagery, word choice, etc. One very important literary technique used by Shakespeare, in all of his works, is his symbolism, which portrayed Shakespeare's life, time period, and messages he wished to get across to his audience. He also used his symbolism to satirize whomever he wished. Shakespeare's works would not be complete without his symbolism, which is used throughout all of his works. One example of William Shakespeare's brilliant use of symbolism can be seen in the play Macbeth.

In this play Shakespeare uses symbolism to represent the overall theme of murder. The contrast of light and dark throughout the play symbolizes the good and evil that is being battled. During the time that Macbeth was written the king was associated with the sun. A sunset, then, represented the king's death or overthrow of his rule in power. "When shall we three meet again . . ." and "That will be ere the set of sun." (Shakespeare, Act I, Scene I, ll 1 and 5), are quotes that symbolize and foreshadow the coming death of the king. They, the witches, shall meet again when the king has been done away with. The contrast and symbolism between light and dark continues throughout the play.

Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires. " (Act I, Scene IV, ll 50-51) symbolizes Macbeth's step towards evil. He does not want anyone or anything to bring to knowledge his dark and evil plans. Another symbolism in the contrast of light and dark is nighttime. Whenever anything bad is occurring, or is about to occur it takes place during the dead of the night in the cover of darkness.

The murders, Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking, and the appearance of the witches all take place at night. Lady Macbeth's sleeping walking shows a good contrast of the light and dark symbolism. At first she craved the darkness, but then she became afraid of it and carried a candle with her to drive away the darkness. In the line, " She has light by her continually; 'tis her command. " (Act V, Scene I ll 26-27), symbolizes her fear of the evil within the darkness.

One very important symbol in Shakespeare's Macbeth is blood in Duncan's murder. The bloodshed represents Macbeth's guilt and shame of the crime he has committed. After killing the king Macbeth says of the blood on his hands, " As they had seen me with these hangman's hands. " (Act II, Scene II, l 28). Macbeth's guilt is portrayed after this act in that he refuses to return to the crime scene to smear the blood on the guards, because he thinks that the blood will only show his guilt and incriminate him further. Another way that the reader can tell that Macbeth is extremely uncomfortable and feeling guilty is because he immediately tries to remove the blood from his hands after killing the guards.

He is very uncomfortable with the blood being on his hands, incriminating him through his guilt. Opposite of blood being a symbol of guilt, water is a symbol of purification from that guilt. After the murder of Duncan Lady Macbeth assures her husband that, "A little water clears us of the deed"; (Act II, Scene II, l 67). Throughout the later portion of the play Lady Macbeth repeatedly rubs her hands together, symbolizing her want and need to wash the deed from her hands. She wants to remove the "spot" physically from her hands and symbolically from her conscience, "Out, damned spot! out, I say! . .

. " (Act V, Scene I, l 39). The water symbolizes the purification of the guilty conscience of Sir and Lady Macbeth. A common object used as symbolism throughout Shakespeare's works are ghosts.

In Hamlet the ghost that he sees is his father. Of course the ghost symbolizes his father's death, but it also symbolizes that his father has come back for some reason. That reason, Hamlet later finds out is for revenge because his father was murdered. Ghost. "Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder. " Ham.

"Murder?" Ghost. "Murder most foul, as in the best it is; But this most foul, strange, and unnatural. " (Act I, Scene V, ll 26-28). The ghost of Hamlet's father plays a very important role in the play, as throughout the entirety of it Hamlet is trying to seek revenge for his father, which was first brought to his attention by the ghost. Another symbol used in Hamlet is the use of the word "dream" Throughout the play Hamlet is confronted with

death, and his uncertainties as to the conditions of the existence of an afterlife (Rogers, 10).

In his "to be, or not to be" soliloquy Hamlet questions as to whether it is worth it to live or die. He refers to death as some sort of dream that may come. He uses the reference of a dream to death because, as dreams are uncertain and often forgotten after they are through, so is death, although it is a dream that one will never be woken up from whether it be a nightmare or sweet escape. "To die - to sleep - No more; and by a sleep to say we end The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation Devoutly to be wish'd. To die - to sleep.

To sleep - perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub! For in that sleep of death what dreams may come When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause. There's the respect That makes calamity of so long life. (Act III, Scene I, ll 56-69). Hamlet's uncertainty of death is felt throughout this entire soliloquy. Later in it he says, But that the dread of something after death, The undiscover'd country from whose bourn No traveler returns, puzzles the will, And makes us rather bear those ills we have Than fly to others that we know not of? (Act II, Scene I, ll 78-82).

In this excerpt the traveler and the undiscovered country symbolizes someone traveling in death onto the unknown after life. This entire soliloquy symbolizes Hamlet's uncertainties of death. One other example of symbolism that is used in Hamlet is a serpent. The serpent, which Hamlet's father's ghost refers his uncle to, represents the evil and deceit that the uncle used to get the crown.

A serpent, many times in literature, represents something that is secretive, evil, and tempting, just as Lucifer, in the form of a serpent was in the garden of Eden. " Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made" (Genesis 3: 1). The ghost of Hamlet's father says of his uncle, ' Tis given out that, sleeping in my orchard, A serpent stung me. So the whole ear of Denmark is by a forged process of my death Rankly abus'd. But know, thou noble youth, The serpent that did sting thy father's life Now wears his crown. (Act I, Scene V, ll 35-39).

And just as the serpent tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden, Hamlet's uncle tempted his mother and very soon after Hamlet's father's death they were married. O wicked wit and gifts, that have the power So to seduce! - won to his shameful lust The sill of my most seeming-virtuous queen. (Act I, Scene V, ll 44-46). The king had stolen from him by the " serpent", " by a brother's hand, of life, of crown, of queen" (ll 74-75). In Shakespeare's Othello there are many different symbols used throughout the play.

One of these symbols is sight. Throughout the play Othello bases his beliefs on what he is told and hears, instead of what he sees. Therefore sight symbolizes Othello's lack of proof with what he sees, but actually does not see. For example, Othello believes Iago when he tells him that Cassio was given the handkerchief he had given Desdemona, by Desdemona herself. Iago. Have you not sometimes seen a handkerchief Spotted with strawberries in your wife's hand? Oth.

I gave her such a one; ' twas my first gift Iago. I know not that; but such a handkerchief (I am sure it was your wife's) did I to-day See Cassio wipe his

beard with. (Act III, Scene III, ll 435-438). The lack of sight, or blindness is vital to the play, as each character's confusion bleeds off of one another's lack of proof. Othello does not see any incriminating actions that Desdemona has committed, and Emilia does not "figuratively" see what her husband has done with his twisted words and actions.

Another symbol in Othello is plants. In many of Iago's speeches he talks about fruits and plants. What they symbolize is that the characters that Iago is manipulating are plants that are slowly growing more and more twisted, and Iago is the gardener that is making sure that they get more and more twisted and stay that way. Iago.

Our bodies are our gardens, to the which our wills are gardeners; so that if we will plant nettles or sow lettuce, set hyssop and weed up thyme, supply it with one gender of herbs or distract it with many - either to have it sterile with idleness or manured with industry - why, the power and corrigible authority of this lies in our wills. If the balance of our lives had not one scale of reason to poise another of sensuality, the blood and baseness of our natures would conduct us to most prepost'rous conclusions. (Act I, Scene III, ll 323-334). Iago, through jealousy or some other motive, most manipulates Othello: Iago. The Moor already changes with my poison. Dangerous conceits are in their natures poisons Which at the first are scarce found to distaste, But with a little act upon the blood Burn like the mines of sulphur.

(Act III, Scene III, ll 325-329). Another symbol used by Iago when he is talking about Othello besides plants is animals. Many times Iago refers to Othello as a Barbary horse, an ass, and an old black ram. These are innuendos Iago

uses to make fun of Othello with. It reflects a level of racism that Iago has for Othello.

Iago. The Moor is of a free and open nature That thinks men honest that but seem to be so; And will as tenderly be led by th' nose As asses are. (Act I, Scene III, ll 405-408). Also, when Iago is talking to Brabantio, Desdemona's father, he refers to Othello: Even now, now, very now, an old black ram Is tupping your white ewe. (Act I, Scene I, ll 88-89). And also: Iago.

Zounds, sir, you are one of those that will not serve God if the devil bid you. Because we come to do you service, and you think we are ruffians, you'll have your daughter cover'd with a Barbary horse; you'll have your nephews neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins, and gennets for Germans...

I am one, sir, that come to tell you your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs. (Act I, Scene I, ll 109-118). One very important symbol in Othello is the handkerchief. It symbolizes different things for each character. For Desdemona, the handkerchief was the first love gift that Othello ever gave her, therefore it symbolizes Othello's love. However, Iago manipulates the meaning of the handkerchief by making Othello see it as a symbol for Desdemona herself.

By doing this, when the handkerchief goes missing Othello takes it as Desdemona is also missing from his bed and is in someone else's. Oth. That handkerchief Did an Egyptian to my mother give. She was a charmer, and could almost read The thoughts of people.

She tole her, while she kept it, ' Twould make her amiable and subdue my father Entirely to her love, but if she lost it Or made a gift of it, my father's eye Should hold her loathly, and his spirits should hunt after new fancies. (Act II, Scene IV, ll 55-63). The handkerchief itself symbolizes what Othello's mother used to keep his father faithful to her. The handkerchief is supposedly made from silk of sacred worms and is dyed with extracted blood from the hearts of mummified virgins.

The pattern of strawberries on the handkerchief on the white background suggests that the bloodstains left on the sheets on a virgin's wedding night, therefore the handkerchief suggests a guarantee of virginity as well as fidelity (Crowther, 47). Another, more subtle symbol is the song that Desdemona sing in act five as she is preparing for bed. The song is about a woman who is betrayed by her lover. She was taught the song by her mother's maid, who suffered the same misfortune as the woman in the song. The lyrics of the song suggest that both men and women are unfaithful to one another.

To Desdemona, this song appears to represent a sad and resigned acceptance of her alienation from Othello's affections, and singing it leads her to question Emilia about the nature and practice of infidelity. Des. My mother had a maid call'd Barbary. She was in love; and he she lov'd prov'd mad And did forsake her. She had a song of ' Willow. ' An old thing ' twas; but it express'd her fortune, And she died singing it.

That song to-night Will not go from my mind. I have much to do But to go hang my head all at one side And sing it like poor Barbary. (Act IV, Scene III,

ll 26-32). Another work of Shakespeare's that contains symbolism is *Romeo and Juliet*.

One main symbol in this play is poison. When Friar Lawrence first appears he remarks that every plant, herb, and stone has its own special properties, and that nothing exists in nature that cannot be put to both good and bad uses. Therefore, poison is not automatically evil, but when put to bad use, it becomes evil in the hands of humans. In plants, herbs, stones, and their true qualities; For naught so vile that on the earth doth live But to the earth some special good doth give; Nor aught so good but, strain'd from that fair use, Revolts from true birth, stumbling on abuse. Virtue itself turns vice, being misapplied, And vice sometime's by action dignified.

Within the infant rind of this small flower Poison hath residence, and medicine power; For this, being smelt, with that part cheers each part; Being tasted, slays all senses with the heart. Two such opposed kings encamp them still In man as well as herbs - grace and rude will; And where the worser is predominant. Full soon the canker death eats up that plant. (Act II, Scene IV, ll16-30). The sleeping potion that the friar gives Juliet makes her appear dead after she inhales it, however, when Romeo sees Juliet, thinking she is dead, he drinks the poison and is killed. Poison symbolizes society's tendency to poison good things and make them fatal, just as the Capulet-Montague feud sours Romeo and Juliet's love into poison.

Another use of symbolism in *Romeo and Juliet* is thumb-biting. This gesture begins a brawl between the Montagues and Capulets. Samson, by flicking his thumbnail from behind his teeth, he shows an insulting gesture, which

offends the other party. It is really actually a very juvenile action, and he does it because he wants to interrogate and get into a fight with the Montagues, but at the same time doesn't want to be accused of starting the fight.

Greg. I will frown as I pass by, and let them take it as they list Samp. Nay, as they dare. I will bite my thumb at them; which is a disgrace to them, if they bear it. Abr. Do you bite your thumb at us, sir? Samp.

I so bite my thumb, sir. Abr. Do you bite your thumb at us, sir? Samp. [aside to Gregory] Is the law of our side if I say ay? Greg.

[aside to Sampson] No. Samp. No, sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, sir, but I bite my thumb, sir. (Act I, Scene I, ll 46-58). Because Sampson is being timid, he wants to be annoying, but not challenging.

The thumb-biting seems to be a rather meaningless gesture, and represents the entire foolishness of the entire Montague-Capulet feud, and also the stupidity of violence in general. One other symbol in Romeo and Juliet is Queen Mab. In the first act Mercutio delivers a speech about the fairy Queen Mab, who rides through the night on her tiny wagon delivering dreams to sleepers. The story says that she doesn't generally bring the best dreams, but instead shows the dreamer dreams of vices that they are addicted to.

An example would be greed, violence, and lust. Queen Mab does not only represent and symbolize the dreams of sleepers, but she also symbolizes the power of waking fantasies, daydreams, and even desires. Through the imagery of the story Mercutio paints suggests that all desires and fantasies

are as nonsensical and fragile as Mab, and that they are also basically corrupting. This point of view greatly contrasts with that of Romeo and Juliet, who see their love as something real and ennobling. O, then I see Queen Mab hath been with you.

She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
In shape no bigger than an agate
stone... And in this state she gallops night by night
Through lovers' brains,
and then they dream of love; O'er courtiers' knees, that dream on cursies
straight; O'er lawyers' fingers, who straight dream on fees; O'er ladies lips,
who straight on kisses dream, Which oft the angry Mab with blisters plagues,
Because their breaths with sweetmeats tainted are. Sometimes she gallops
o'er a courtier's nose, And then dreams he of smelling out a suit; And
sometime comes she with a tithe-pig's tail
Tickling a parson's nose as a' lies
asleep, Then dreams he of another benefice. Sometime she driveth o'er a
soldier's neck, And the dreams he of cutting foreign throats, Of breaches,
ambuscadoes, Spanish blades, Of healths five fathom deep; and then anon
Drums in his ear, at which he starts and wakes, And being thus frightened,
swears a prayer or two And sleeps again.

This is that very Mab That plats the manes of horses in the night And bakes
the elflocks in foul sluttish hairs, Which once untangled much misfortune
bodes. This is the hag, when maids lie on their backs, That presses them and
learns them first to bear, Making them women of good carriage. This is she -
(Act I, Scene IV, ll 53-54 and ll 70-94). The symbolism described in this paper
from William Shakespeare's plays Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, and Romeo and
Juliet are just examples of how Shakespeare uses symbolism throughout his
works.

While other literary techniques, such as imagery and diction, play an important role in Shakespeare's works, symbolism plays just as great, if not a greater role in his pieces. Many times the symbols that Shakespeare used carried a theme throughout the entire work, and also, many times served as foreshadowing. Shakespeare's life, time period in which he lived, messages he wished to portray to his audience, and people he wished to satirize all were sources in which Shakespeare derived his symbolism in his works from.

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