

Antony and Cleopatra and a game of chess essay



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The particularity about these two passages is that although written centuries apart, they reflect each other through language, subject matter and universality. The verse "The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne, glowed on the marble" from TS. Eliot's poem *A Game of Chess* has long been acknowledged as a direct allusion to Enobarbus' description of the genuine and natural Cleopatra in Act II Scene 2 of Shakespeare's tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra*.

Likewise, I believe that the verse "O'erpicturing that Venus where we see the fancy outwork nature," from Shakespeare's play can be interpreted as being an inspiration to TS. Eliot's creation of the materialistic and artificial woman in his poem. Indeed, a major similarity between these two passages is that although they are both essentially about a woman, in neither passage is the woman really described. It is rather the woman's milieu and her effect on her surroundings that are described in great depth and detail.

This makes the setting and the atmosphere of the two passages key to the understanding of whom each woman is, since they are the reader's only source of information concerning her. Therefore, instead of being directly and explicitly described, each woman gradually and implicitly takes shape in the reader's mind as the details of her effects and influences on her surroundings are revealed. Language plays an extremely important role in the comparison of these two passages since, after all, it is the language, the words chosen by the poet that create the divergences and contrasts between the two women.

Upon first glimpse, the reader is manipulated into thinking that the language used in both passages is very similar. This is due to the recurrence and simultaneous use of some of the words in the two passages. However, upon careful reading one realizes that although the same words may be used in both poems, it is the way each word is chosen, placed and emphasized in the poem that determines its relationship to its importance in the character's description. Each word carries the magical power of suggestion, but it is important to note that no word can stand on its own.

TS. Eliot's poem begins with only slight changes to the words of Enobarbus' speech, but it soon becomes significantly different to the original Shakespeare. Instead of sitting in a barge, the woman in TS Eliot's poem is sitting in a chair. Already, this slight difference between the two passages tells the reader a great deal about the woman in context. The word "Chair" in Eliot's poem is capitalized, therefore emphasized. It acts as an anti-climax since it is the first major difference the reader falls upon during his reading of the text.

In Shakespeare's poem, it is a barge that Cleopatra fills like a throne, whereas in Eliot's poem it is merely a chair that the woman fills. This makes Eliot's character come across as far less extravagant and magnanimous as Cleopatra, whom Shakespeare portrays as being so great that she fills her barge as if it were a throne, thus making both the barge and Eliot's character seem tiny in comparison to her majesty's grandeur. Also, in comparison with a chair "glowing on the marble," the mystical image of Cleopatra's barge "burning on the water" adds to Cleopatra's magnificence.

The senses, more precisely sight and odor, and the natural elements, fire and water, seem to be the key themes of these two passages. They both contribute to the description of the atmosphere and setting, which in turn are a description of the character. The difference is that in Eliot's poem, the elements, due to their 'syntheticness', damage and consume the senses, whereas in Shakespeare's play, the natural elements not only live in harmony with but are also in love with the senses.

As TS Eliot's poem proceeds, the images that describe the setting and atmosphere seem to be much larger than those of Shakespeare. However, these again, only succeed in making his character look diminutive and insignificant in comparison. The language Eliot uses to describe the room in which his character is contained is very elaborate, superfluous and extravagant, thus creating a heavy atmosphere and making the reader feel as if he himself was suffocating in all the adornments around the room.

Indeed, the character in Eliot's poem may own a myriad of useless ornaments; it is not materialistic embellishments that will ever make her as sophisticated or refined as Cleopatra in Shakespeare's play is. Viewed in this perspective, the descriptions of the "Sevenbranched candelabra" "doubled by the flames" of the Cupids and "reflected upon the table" by "the glitter of her jewels" create a blinding and overpowering effect.

In the same way, the 'vials of ivory and coloured glass' that contain "strange synthetic perfumes" suffocates or "drowns the senses," to the extent that the air is "freshened by the window." The words "coffered ceiling" (the reader inevitably making a link between the word "coffered"

and the word coffin) and “ hushing the room enclosed” (the word “ enclosed” here is emphasized since it is placed at the end of the sentence) also contribute to the claustrophobic, suffocating atmosphere of the poem.

In Shakespeare’s play, the In his poem, A game of Chess it seems as if TS. Eliot is using the character of Cleopatra already invented by Shakespeare as a tool to create his own imaginary female character. Instead of starting from nothing, Eliot started with the idea of Cleopatra- a stunning, enchanting and very powerful woman, who he distorts or bends out of shape in a very subtle way in order to fabricate the woman about whom he writes.

This supports the idea that all writing, all artistic creation, is in one way or another influenced by another. A totally different approach can also be taken when comparing these two passages. A different interpretation of these poems could be that they are a chronological reversal of the stereotypical view of a woman’s role in society. Although this may seem like a far-fetched idea, it is clear that in contrast with Eliot’s character, Cleopatra is a very powerful woman.