

TEACHING IMAGE PATTERNS IN *HAMLET*

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In her fascinating study of Shakespeare's imagery Caroline Spurgeon writes:

The greater and richer the work the more valuable and suggestive become the images, so that in the case of Shakespeare I believe one can scarcely overrate the possibilities of what may be discovered through a systematic examination of them.¹

A systematic examination involving complete coverage is not possible in class or tutorial room, but many of the difficulties experienced by pupils or students in the study of *Hamlet* may be resolved by an analysis of some or the main image patterns in the play.

First, the question, 'what is an image?' needs to be addressed, and the answer need not be one of great sophistication or subtlety. Many literary glossaries give the teacher a variety of definitions with which to work. The students need to grasp the fundamental idea that the dramatist creates many 'mental pictures'² in order to present ideas and concepts descriptively³.

After the group has agreed on a few working definitions of the image, pupils or students should be invited to create their own mental picture — to visualize a train travelling rapidly, kept on track, and given direction by its rails. This is to be kept in mind as a rough analogy for the movement of the play, which is kept 'on track' and given direction by the image patterns created by the dramatist. In other words, the image patterns support and accompany the play's action and plot like the rails do a train. The images carry, support, and convey ideas, concepts, philosophical speculations, and insights as the action moves forward. By means of the image patterns, Shakespeare gives the reader or audience the necessary information for understanding the profoundest issues in the play.

Weeds

Central to an initial understanding of Hamlet and his dilemmas are the images of the unweeded garden and **WEEDS**, and it is useful to start here. The group should be invited to picture an unweeded garden, and then to extend the implications of the image to life in the kingdom of Denmark.

The whole country is an unweeded garden; more, in Hamlet's depressed and despairing state, life itself is such a garden. It should be pointed out that by conceiving of a corrupt kingdom or state as an unweeded garden, Shakespeare is able to draw many analogies between what may happen in a neglected garden and what may happen in a kingdom that is badly ruled.

The teacher may enlarge on these ideas by briefly giving examples drawn from other plays, such as the description in *Richard II*, Act III scene iv:

the whole land,
Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers chok'd up,
Her fruit trees all unprun'd, her hedges ruin'd,
Her knots disorder'd, and her wholesome herbs
Swarming with caterpillars.'

In a similar vein Hamlet describes his experience of life in Denmark:

... 'Tis an unweeded garden
That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature
Possess it merely [I.ii]

An unweeded garden is one in which weeds have taken over; they *possess* the garden. The weeds are *rank*, they are overabundant, disgusting, and foul; they are *gross*, large, coarse, and base.

Weeds are one of the many images representing and illustrating evil in the play; they tell us something about the nature of evil. Like weeds, evil spreads quickly, overtaking and destroying its victims. Therefore it is inadvisable to 'spread the compost on the weeds/ To make them ranker' [III.iv]. Under the rule of the wicked king, Claudius, evil flourishes in Denmark, for he spreads the 'compost' liberally.

Flowers

In such a garden, **FLOWERS** - the best and noblest forms of cultivation - will be choked and destroyed by weeds. But a garden that is cared for and weeded is a garden in which flowers may grow freely and in beauty, for conditions are ideal for them to develop and achieve their potential.

Attention should be directed to the flower imagery in the play, and the characters with whom such imagery is associated. For example, in Act I scene iii, Ophelia is warned by Laertes about the dangers to a good and virtuous young woman in society. He illustrates by showing what happens to young buds in an untended garden:

The canker galls the infants of the spring
Too oft before their buttons be disclosed;
And in the morn and liquid dew of youth
Contagious blastments are most imminent. [I.iii]

The 'infants of the spring' are little, unopened buds, and the 'canker' — the worm — destroys them before they even open. It is such young and vulnerable flowers that are particularly susceptible to withering blights — to 'contagious blastments'.

This will be the fate of Ophelia. She is the 'rose of May' [IV.v]. The blights and weeds of evil will destroy her. The imagery enables us to understand her plight; she is young, innocent, and vulnerable, unable to defend herself unaided against the 'weeds' — the evils rampant in Denmark.

Later in the play, when Ophelia goes mad, blighted or unbalanced by the evils of Hamlet's rejection of her [III.i] and by the death of her father, Shakespeare locates her among flowers [IV.v]. She carries a bunch of flowers and herbs, each one of which has a symbolic meaning. She hands them out: rosemary for remembrance; pansies for sorrow; fennel for flattery; columbines for unfaithfulness; rue for repentance.⁵ The group should be encouraged to work out the 'statement' that Ophelia makes by means of the language of flowers.

In her death Ophelia is also surrounded by flowers, and weeds. When she comes to the brook, she is garlanded with crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples. Singleton comments on the passage describing Ophelia's death:

Shakespeare did not select *Ophelia's* flowers at random. They typified the sorrows of the gentle victim of disappointed love whose end was first madness, then suicide. The crow-flowers signified 'fair maiden'; the nettles, 'stung to the quick'; the daisies, 'her virgin bloom'; and the long purples. 'under the cold hand of Death'. Thus what Shakespeare intended to convey by this code of flowers was, 'A fair maiden. stung to the quick, her virgin bloom in the cold hand of Death'⁶."

James Harvey Bloom's comments on these plants are quoted, and enlarge the meanings conveyed by the image pattern of noxious weeds. It should be emphasized that the weeds are no longer generic; they are named by Shakespeare. Bloom points out that the *crow-flowers* are likely to be 'the poisonous rank *Ranunculus reptans* and its allies', that the *nettle* may be the 'white dead nettle *Lamium album* L.⁸ and that the *long purples* may be '*Arum maculatum*, another plant of baleful influence.'⁹ Bloom adds, 'With this selection we have plants of the same situation flowering at the same time and all more or less baneful in their influence.'¹⁰

It is significant that Ophelia falls to her 'muddy death' accompanied by weeds:

There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hang, an envious sliver broke;
When down her weedy trophies and herself
Fell in the weeping brook. [IV.vii]

The image of Ophelia carrying a garland of weeds as she falls perfectly expresses the reasons for her tragic fate.

The evil signified by such weeds and the unweeded garden is emphasized by an ancient gardeir and its serpent — the Garden of Eden and the Satanic snake. The ghost of Hamlet's father recounts how he was murdered, and his words evoke the ancient garden and the evil serpent in it:

Now, Hamlet, hear:
'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 abused. But know, thou noble youth,
The serpent that did sting thy father's life
Now wears his crown. [I.v]

The serpent in the old king's personal Garden of Eden is his evil brother, Claudius, who poured poison in his ear. Claudius is thus serpent and Cain, for his deed

. . . hath the primal, eldest curse upon 't -
A brother's murder! [III.iii]

Poison

POISON is also one of the *manifestions* of evil in Denmark, and references to poison move with the images of weeds through the play, the one image pattern supporting and extending the meaning of the other. Real poison is poured in the ear of the King; metaphorical poison, evil, is poured into the kingdom of Denmark.

Students must grasp that Shakespeare uses a metaphor so that the audience or reader can *picture* the body of the king as a city or a state. The architectural imagery transforms human anatomy; it becomes urban:

. . . thy uncle stole,
With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial,
And in the porches of mine ears did pour
The leperous distilment; whose effect
Holds such an enmity with blood of man
That, swift as quicksilver, it courses through
The natural gates and alleys of the body. [I.v]

The relationship between real poison coursing through the veins and organs of the sleeping king, and evil coursing through the *gates*, *alleys*, and *porches* of the King's city, among his people, must be stressed.

Poison— real and figurative — courses through the play. By Act IV scene vii, poison becomes a means of killing for Laertes:

. . . I'll anoint my sword.
I bought an unction of a rountebank,
So mortal, that but dip a knife in it,
Where it draws blood no cataplasm so rare,
Collected from all simples that have virtue
Under the moon, can save the thing from death
That is but scratched withal. I'll touch my point
With this contagion, that, if I gall him slightly,
It may be death. [IV.vii]

Laertes becomes a poisoner like Claudius. He premeditates murder, and he is corrupted by the figurative poison, evil, which is as lethal as real poison. Claudius's evil grows, for he proposes poisoning wine and giving it to Hamlet to drink.

In the final scene, deadly poisons wreak havoc. Hamlet is wounded by Laertes's poisoned sword, and in an exchange of weapons, Laertes is wounded by the same poisoned weapon. His own poison and his own evil kill him. Hamlet, the 'rose of the fair state' [II.i], dies by poison, the equivalent of the weed in the image patterns.

Claudius, who used poison to gain power, dies by poison ~ the poisoned sword *and* the poisoned wine. Like Laertes, his own poison and his own evil kill him. Gertrude, the Queen, who entered into an evil and incestuous marriage with Claudius at the beginning of the play, drinks his poisoned wine at the end of the play. Her last words are 'I am poisoned'. Students should appreciate that she speaks truly on every level of meaning.

Disease

The concept of evil is also conveyed by images of sickness and **DISEASE**, which support those of poison and weeds. Within moments of the play beginning, the sentry says'. . . I am sick at heart', and the same can be said of the tragic hero, Hamlet, who suffers from a black and despairing melancholy. He admits:

I have of late — but wherefore I know not — lost all my mirth, forgone all
custom of exercises; and, indeed, it goes so heavily with my disposition that
this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory. [II.ii]

Students should examine the concentration of disease images in Act III scene iv, where Hamlet confronts his mother in her closet. He accuses her of incestuous love which

. . . takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love,
And sets a blister there.

The connection between Gertrude's sin and the imaginary blister should be established. Hamlet's words invite the audience or reader to *picture* a smooth brow with the disfiguring sore upon it, and the causes of such an eruption: incest causes a spiritual infection which *visibly* debilitates and marks the sinner.

Hamlet urges Gertrude not to dismiss his denunciation of her conduct as the product of madness, for

It will but skin and film the ulcerous place,
Whilst rank corruption, mining all within,
Infects unseen.

Beneath the skin, infecting and destroying the health of the body is the pus and festering matter. In physical terms, this is a powerful image of evil working in the soul.

Hamlet uses disease imagery to enable Gertrude — and the audience or reader — to understand the nature of her evil deed. Disease is the malfunctioning and corruption of the flesh. It may be manifested externally in sores and in blisters as it destroys the tissues of the body within. Gertrude's evil is manifested publicly in an incestuous marriage, internally her evil works upon her soul, where she can see

. . . such black and grained spots
As will not leave their tinct.

The image patterns often function in unison. The effects of poison on the old king's body are like a dreadful leprous disease covering the entire body in eruptions:

... a most instant tetter barked about,
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust
All my smooth body. [I.v]

Even in the play-within-the-play, Lucianus' speech integrates many image patterns — poison, weeds, and disease:

Thou mixture rank, of midnight weeds collected,
With Hecate's ban thrice blasted, thrice infected,
The natural magic and dire property,
On wholesome life usurp immediately. [III.ii]

The word 'infected' suggests disease as does the destruction of 'wholesome life'.

Students should understand that the many images conveying ideas of evil *bond* together easily because they are usually ugly, even repulsive, often frightening, and always destructive.

Ugly destructiveness, which is a recognizable attribute of evil in this play, exists side by side with images of great beauty.¹¹ The latter provide a parallel but different 'rail' in the momentum and direction of the play. These image patterns establish that Divine Providence is the source of Good, and appropriately Shakespeare has recourse to religious imagery and symbols, to Christmas, angels, heaven, and the scriptures.

Christian imagery

CHRISTIAN IMAGERY is announced early in the play in the beautiful description of Christmas by Marcellus:

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated.
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then they say, no spirit dare walk abroad,
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm —
So hallowed and so gracious is the time. [I.i]

This description makes clear the difference between Christmas Eve - wholesome, holy, and free from the visitations of frightening ghosts — and the unwholesome night with which the play begins. It is so unwholesome that the sentries have twice seen the 'dreaded sight' of a ghost. Until the evil has been destroyed, metaphorical darkness will continue in Denmark. The nights will continue to be unwholesome. Murder, incest, swinish wassails, lies and spying keep them from being 'gracious'.

In contrast to the spirit that dares walk abroad (and fairies and witches with their sinister powers) are angels, the instruments of God, who are invoked throughout the play, and who are a reminder of God's power in a Christian universe in which Good and Evil are in opposition. Hamlet, on seeing his father's ghost calls on 'Angels and ministers of grace' [I.iv] to defend them, and in Act III scene iv, on seeing the ghost in his mother's closet, he says:

Save me, and hover o'er me with your wings,
You heavenly guards!

When Hamlet dies Horatio wishes that 'flights of angels' [V.ii] may sing him to his rest. The ghost evokes the beauty of 'a radiant angel' [I.v], and at the burial of Ophelia, Laertes combines, in a beautiful union, purity (*unpolluted flesh*), faithfulness (*violets*) and heaven (*minist'ring angel*):¹²

. . . from her fair and unpolluted flesh

May violets spring! - I tell thee, churlish priest,
A minist'ring angel shall my sister be . . . [V.i]

References to classical gods support the angel images by continuing the polarity between Good and Evil, and by investing goodness with beauty. They set up an opposition between Hyperion, Old Hamlet, and the Satyr, Claudius. Hamlet contrasts the two brothers:

See, what a grace was seated on this brow —
Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself;
An eye like Mars, to threaten and command;
A station like the herald Mercury
New lighted on a heaven-kissing hill;
A combination and a form indeed
Where every god did seem to set his seal,
To give the world assurance of a man. [III.iv]

In Hamlet's eyes his father had revealed such grace that he had been a *combination* of gods. Claudius, by contrast, is blighted 'like a mildewed ear' and is the rank growth of an unweeded garden. He is

A murder and a villain,
A slave that is not twentieth part the tithe
Of your precedent lord; a vice of kings;
A cutpurse of the empire and the rule
That from a shelf the precious diadem stole,
And put it in his pocket! [III.iv]

Claudius is a combination of all that is vicious and ugly. He is not related to any pantheon, and his plea 'Help, angels! Make assay' [III.iii] goes unanswered.

One of Claudius's most vicious decisions is to send Hamlet to certain death in England. The exchange between Hamlet and Claudius is one of threat and counter-threat. Claudius replies to Hamlet's laconic 'Good' with a veiled threat:

So is it, if thou knew'st our purposes.

Hamlet replies:

I see a cherub that sees them. [IV.iii]

The angelic being is now specifically a cherub, and belongs to the first order of mighty angels. The cherub possesses divine knowledge and knows what Claudius intends, for as Hooker states:

In the matter of knowledge, there is between the angels of God and the children of men this difference: angels already have full and complete knowledge in the highest degree that can be imparted to them.¹³

Claudius's opposition is formidable, though for the most part unseen. Pitted against him are the forces of Good — Divine Providence. Hamlet comes to understand this. Man proposes but God disposes.

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will. [V.ii]

Tom Stoppard in a lecture to the International Shakespeare Association comments on these lines as posing the problem of free-will and predetermination. He adds a piece of fascinating information to tie in with the play's garden imagery:

. . . there is a story, well authenticated I believe, that some fifty years ago a man strolling through the leafy lanes near Stratford-upon-Avon came across two men who were working on tidying up the hedge. He stopped to watch them and saw that they were working as a team, the one in front hacking away at the hedge and the one following snipping it. On being questioned, the old man doing the hacking explained, 'Well, you see, I rough-hews them, and he shapes their ends.'¹⁴

And Stoppard observes that whether true or not, the anecdote reveals the 'minutiae of observed physical life pitter-patter[ing] through his plays'.¹⁵

The trimming and shaping in Act V scene ii, which emphasizes the will of Divine Providence, is significantly different from the untrimmed and unweeded garden, in Act I scene ii, where good seems to be retreating before things rank and gross. This image pattern has been extended, developed and concluded.

The garden of Denmark will be ready to receive the new King, who is not a Dane, but a Norwegian, an outsider, who comes to the kingdom untouched by its former weeds, poisons, and diseases. How Fortinbras will "garden" we are not told — the possibilities of his reign, given his career, should give rise to much fruitful discussion in class.

Students should now be in a position to understand the functions of some of the main image patterns in the play, and to appreciate that failing to give them full attention can in a very real sense derail the play, compromise its direction, and leave the reader or audience with a puzzling plot, a superficial sense of character motivation, and an inadequate grasp of the moral issues.

Footnotes

1. Spurgeon, Caroline. *Shakespeare's Imagery And What It Tells Us*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1961, p 5
2. Abrams, M H. *A Glossary Of Literary Terms*, Third Edition; Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc, New York, 1971
3. Shaw, Harry. *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York, 1972
4. Craig, W J, Ed. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Oxford University Press, London, 1922
5. Lott, Bernard, Ed. *Hamlet*, New Swan Shakespeare, Advanced Series, Longmans, London and Harlow, 1969, p 170
6. Singleton. Esther. *The Shakespeare Garden*, Cecil Palmer, London, n d, p 207
7. Bloom, James Harvey, quoted in *The Shakespeare Garden*, p 208
8. As above, p 208
9. As above, p 209
10. As above, p 209
11. Spurgeon, Caroline, p 319
12. Lott, Bernard, p 200
13. Hooker, Richard. *Of The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (Books I to IV), Everyman's Library, London, 1965. p 166
14. Stoppard, Tom. *Is True What They Say About Shakespeare?* International Shakespeare Association, Occasional Paper No 2, Printed for the International Shakespeare Association, at the University Press, Oxford, 1982, pp 12-13
15. As above, p 13
16. Schmidt, Alexander. *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary*, Volumes I and II, Dover Publications, New York, 1971

(All quotations from *Hamlet* are from the New Swan edition.)