

Space in the Selected Plays of William Shakespeare

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Abstract

Literature consists of writings that have lasting value and contain a wealth of meanings that are stated, implied or embedded within the work. Space may be considered as an effective literary device that helps in unearthing meanings hidden within the words, between the lines and also among different works of a single author. Spaces can speak much more than spoken words. The spaces in between Shakespeare's quotes are intertwined with ambiguity which enchants any keen observer and arouses curiosity. Space manifests itself in myriad ways in his works. This paper makes an effort to decode some of the hidden meanings of the spaces in some of his quotes. The paper consists of such an analytical study of the plays *Julius Caesar*, *Othello*, *Titus Andronicus* and *The Merchant of Venice*. The analysis is done by applying the notion of theatre and space in the plays of Shakespeare.

Key words: Space, betrayal, justice, revenge

Space in the Selected Plays of Shakespeare

As per definitions, literature is a noun that refers to written works, especially those considered of superior or lasting artistic merit. It is a discipline that undergoes a paradigm shift in its subject, scope and objective during the course of time. There exists a plethora of other definitions for the seemingly simple ten letter word "literature". However, the beauty of literature lies in the fact that it is beyond all definitions. The failure to find an apt and precise definition for something creates an urge to explore it further and learn more and more about it. And the thing with literature is that the more one tries to uncover its meanings, the more ambiguous it becomes! In a way, to understand literature is to understand one's own self. Because in some way or the other literature is life itself. Words bring completeness to the world.

They have the ability to mesmerize people without the help of spooky voodoo and magical wands. The magic seems to rest within the beautiful arrangement of subtle yet powerful words.

Apart from words there are various other techniques that authors employ to add meaning and texture to their works. Pauses, or rather, spaces are among the highest in ranking. Many prominent authors have made use of spaces to enhance the impact in their works. Among them, the most prominent one is Shakespeare.

Even after four centuries, Shakespeare continues to beckon us from bookshelves where his works have always enjoyed a place of pride. Dust has not collected on his masterpieces and termites have not eaten into his timeless talent. Like his enchanting Cleopatra, Shakespeare's creations cannot be withered by time nor can the changing world make his ideas and characters obsolete. Unlike other authors who can satiate our appetites after a few readings, Shakespeare makes us crave for more and more. This is because he had the uncanny insight that made him create characters that were of the earth earthy. Shakespeare represented Humanism which characterized the European Renaissance, and especially the Elizabethan Age of England. Authors and artists have an extraordinary ability to foresee things that may befall upon the human race. Shakespeare has proved himself to be a Nostradamus in that sense. On analyzing the plays of Shakespeare, we find that many of his quotes or dialogues burst with multiple implications.

***Julius Caesar* – Friendship, Deception and Caution**

“Et tu, Brute?” (*Julius Caesar* III i 77) is arguably the most quoted line from the Roman play of Shakespeare *Julius Caesar*. Julius Caesar, the most powerful among the triumvirate utters these words in shocked disbelief when he recognizes his most intimate and best loved friend, Brutus among the assassins that stab him to death.

The victorious hero, Julius Caesar was back after having defeated the sons of Pompey in battle. He was basking in the glory of his accomplishment; the public had gone all gaga over him and were celebrating his triumphant return. His growing popularity, arrogance and hubris made the others like Cassius nervous as they feared that he was steadily heading towards absolute

power. Already he had been offered the crown thrice and though he had declined it each time, the others found this ominous. The best thing, they thought, would be to arrest his forward march with his death. Cassius convinced Brutus who also complied with the plan eventually, and they executed their conspiracy by stabbing the unsuspecting Caesar 33 times. When Caesar articulates the words “Even you, Brutus”, there is a pause before he utters the name of Brutus, which is consolidated by the punctuation mark ‘comma’. This pause or space is the moment when Caesar understands that his best friend had become an enemy, and realizes the enormity of the betrayal.

The line, especially with its eloquent pause, could also be a thoughtful caution to Brutus that a similar fate awaited him, too. The unfortunate move made by the assassins misfired as it was interpreted as treachery and not love for the Roman empire, especially after the famous speech made by Antony another bosom friend of the mighty Caesar and a consummate orator. Thus, Caesar’s words proved to be prophetic as the conspirators and executors of the plot to kill Caesar also met with their ends not long after Caesar’s assassination.

Othello – No Breathing Space

“...Yet she must die, else she betray more men.

Put out the light and then put out the light.” (*Othello* V ii 6-7)

These are the words of Othello, the Moor, a man of action, just before he kills his beautiful and beloved wife, Desdemona. Othello is convinced that he has ‘clinching evidence’ of his wife’s infidelity in the form of the infamous handkerchief. Jealousy apart, he believes that he has no choice but to put his wife to death for being unfaithful to him. The second line tells us that he will first put out the candle and then put out the life of his wife by strangling her. He realizes that the candle, once put out can be relit, but the other light (Desdemona’s life) cannot be retrieved once it is taken. He effectively and quickly quells the stirrings within his treacherous heart:

“Oh balmy breath that dost almost persuade
Justice to break her sword...” (*Othello* V ii 17-18)

Equipped with such strong evidence, Othello does not see any need for further enquiry before he performs his duty. Othello, here, is less a cuckold and more a man of law, administering justice. He straightaway rejects Desdemona's pleas to spare her life, to let her live for another night – at least for half an hour. But Othello is adamant and says: "being done, there is no pause" (*Othello* V ii 93). Here, Shakespeare has used the tool of space in the other way. Had Othello tarried for a while, things would have been different, because very soon after murdering Desdemona he gets clear evidence of her innocence and chastity. The space which was missing here can be perceived as the 'would-have-been'. Shakespeare shows that there are no 'ifs' in life.

The Playwright's Space – A Case of Delayed Explanation

Science says that every action has an equal and opposite reaction. The psychology of 'tit for tat' and its consequent perils are abundantly portrayed in Shakespeare's most miserable flop play *Titus Andronicus*. The play begins with Titus Andronicus's return from war with Tamora, the queen of Goths, her three sons and Aaron, the Moor. But only four of twenty-five of Titus's sons are alive. As per the Roman rituals he sacrifices Tamora's eldest son to his dead sons. Thus, he invites the perennial wrath of Tamora who is seized by an overwhelming drive for revenge, and dedicates the rest of her life to destroy him utterly. Violence reigns in the events that ensue and by the time the curtain falls on the play, the audience become witnesses to, or hears of numerous killings, dismembered bodies, insanity, rapes, live burials, and so on. Naturally, the audience of the Elizabethan Age was repelled by the gory episodes and vengeance of this play. No wonder this was one play that was totally rejected by Shakespeare's audience.

Years later, Shakespeare wrote a very successful play, *The Merchant of Venice*. In the course of the play Shylock, the Jew and money lender justifies his demand for a pound of flesh – the condition on which he had lent money to Bassanio, friend of Antonio who was an anti-Semitic – with a pithy speech that expresses the thoughts of the oppressed minorities, and the genius of Shakespeare in capturing such sentiments with empathy and compassion.

"...If you prick us, do we not
bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you
poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall
we not revenge?.....?"

The space, in this case, is the years that passed between the staging of the two plays, *Titus Andronicus* and *The Merchant of Venice*. As Shakespeare matured as a playwright over the years, and his plays became more and more popular, he must have perceived the situation in the latter play as an opportunity to explain (though not to justify) the unrelenting gore and violence of the former through this speech of Shylock which is touching and also undeniably logical, and therefore acceptable to all.

It would be pertinent to quote a line from one of Shakespeare's plays, here, that shows empathy towards wronged creatures: "The smallest worm will turn, being trodden on" (*Henry IV Part III* ii 2 859)

Understood the Psychology of People

Shakespeare understood the psychology of people who have been ill-treated, suppressed, tortured, or simply discriminated against. Thus, Shylock's speech maybe said to be Shakespeare's way of explaining the ruthless actions of Tamora who wanted to avenge the violent killing of her son in *Titus Andronicus*.

If we look deeper into the characters of Tamora and Shylock, we can see a similarity as both are members of marginalized sections of society. Tamora, being a woman could do nothing to save her son though she was as shattered by his killing as Titus must have been when he lost twenty-one of his sons. Women, the so-called 'weaker sex', have been marginalized throughout the history of mankind, and continue to be so even in this age of education and sophistication. So have the Jews been treated badly discriminated against and marginalized by the mainstream community of Christians, right from the time of the death of Christ to Hitler's notorious Holocaust to the times of the Neo-Nazis. Shakespeare has given a very eloquent and profound speech to Shylock (though he is the antagonist) in the play, and has thereby displayed a wider understanding of mankind. He has also tied up the unexplained loose threads of the former play in the latter one after a lapse (Space) of time.

Connecting the Plays

Though seemingly far-fetched, it is not entirely impossible to connect two plays written about different subjects at different points of time. But literature is all about filling the gaps and connecting the dots. At times we might just have to put the dots ourselves. Space also exists in thoughts which may go forward and backward trying to find connections and explain the causes and effects of events.

To Conclude

Space is the gap, the delay, the pause, the silence, the untold...all these are the different manifestations of space in works of art. Just as liquids assume the shape of the containers that they are poured into, so also reality and spaces in between words take up shapes that could become relevant, significant and eloquent.

As Keats famously said, “Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter...” (*Ode on a Grecian Urn* Stanza ii 11-12). The Romantic poet has put it so simply in his *Grecian Urn*. Indeed, reading between the lines and looking for meanings in spaces and the lack of them can be very rewarding and make literature richer and deeper.

Needless to say, Shakespeare was a genius. We do not know much about him, but there is more to his works and words than meets the eye. Perhaps, he wanted his plays to be read as a comprehensive whole – even sequentially. His sonnets do seem to have a plot and we can understand them better when we read them in the right order. If we also read his plays in this way we will be able to detect a flow in them which connects them to one another. Shakespeare must have left a clue or a thread in each of his plays that helps us understand the next better. The beauty of his works lies in this connectivity as well as in the spaces within and between them.

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