

Multi-Interpretations of Shakespeare's Othello's "Put Out the light..." and Macbeth's "Out, Out; Brief Candle"?

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Abstract

In Shakespeare's two tragic plays, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, the utterances, "Put out the light" and "Out, out; brief candle" mean literally that Othello is going to murder Desdemona and Macbeth confirms the death of Lady Macbeth, but on close study of the phrases, it can be perceived that their interpretations hold multi-dimensional potential. Therefore, an endeavour is made to explore the contextual framework of these phrases in all magnitudes.

Keywords: Id, Primordial State, Promethean, Super Ego

1. Introduction

Human Psyche is defined as soul, spirit, innermost self, individuality, vital force, life force, subconscious mind or intellect. Sigmund Freud's Structural Model of the Psyche describes id, ego and super-ego, and based on the activity and interaction of which man's mental activities are determined. Shakespeare's tragedies give much focus on the passions and personal lives of the principal characters. The workings of id and super-ego in the innermost self of Othello and Macbeth come to light in their soliloquies at the crucial moment in their life. Shakespeare puts powerful and insightful phrases in these contexts to highlight their struggle between self-gratification and sense of reason which may kindle multiple interpretations.

2. Othello's Initiation into Conjugal Disharmony

This research article is an attempt to look at the deliverance of Othello and Macbeth about putting out the candle light in the final Acts, in multiple dimensions. In Act 5, scene 1,

of *Othello*, when Othello enters Desdemona's bed chamber with a candle light, he tells himself that the infidelity of Desdemona to her father Brabantio is the main cause of her death.

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul-
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars-
It is the cause. (Line no 1-3) [1]

When the trial of Desdemona and Othello, and their elopement, take place in front of the Duke, in Act One, Brabantio insists to Othello that he also will be cheated one day in future by Desdemona as he has been fooled by her. These words start troubling and echoing in his mind. At the end of the trial, Brabantio tells him:

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:
She has deceiv'd her father, and may thee. (Act1, scene3,
line 292-293) [1]

The motive behind his saying is, Othello is a Black Moor, whereas Desdemona and Cassio belong to the same race, community, religion, language and country; and these similarities, he feels are the reasons for getting

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isolated from her. Othello is elder by several years to Cassio and Desdemona, and he is recently baptized. As far as Shakespeare is concerned that the immediate conversion of Othello to a Roman Catholic would never change his baseness, which has been in him for many generations. These factors of commonness begin to intensify Othello's suspicion on her. Iago's words about their betrayal also add more fuel to his wrath.

3. The Signification of the Words 'and Then'

Though Othello decides to kill Desdemona at once, he does not want to give her a cruel death. His passionate love for her never allows him to stab her, or even a look at her exquisite eyes will not allow him to execute his murderous task. Othello is not ready to allow even a drop of blood to stain her dress, which is the symbol of her purity. To him, she should be as untainted as snow. She may be an insignia of an alabaster.

Yet I'll not shed her blood,
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,
And smooth as monumental alabaster, (Act 5, scene 1,
line no 3- 5)[1]

Though she looks untainted as wholesome as snow, Othello is strong in his conviction to do away with her for she will beguile more men. Here he says "put out the light" twice, the phrases being connected with "and then". Hence it leads to a lot of interpretations.

Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men,
Put out the light, and then put out the light, (Act 5,
scene 1, line no 6- 7)[1]

It means that he is to blow out the candle first and then blow out her life. The second "light" denotes her life. This is a belief of Greek myths that Prometheus stole fire from Heaven and blown out the light into a man for getting his life. So life originated in a man by Prometheus. Since that day, human life has been transferred to others is only in the form of light. With reference to this, in this context it can be taken that Othello means that Desdemona's light (life) is to be put out. The other interpretation is, Light symbolizes wisdom. In order to kill his treacherous wife he does not want his wisdom to interfere in executing his villainous wish. So he blows out wisdom. Another explication is, Light is the symbol of the presence of God, hence he does not like His presence in him at the time of murder. The strong belief of every theist is that God is within him, whatever the religion he belongs to. Since he is going to

murder her, he wants to desert his devoutness and possess devilishness.

4. A Plural Reading

The other way of reading is, a candle is not apparently seen but only the flame blazes prominently. Here, Othello is a candle, and Desdemona is flame. He wants to assert his authority that a candle can desert the flame. Othello feels that he is overshadowed by the high status of Desdemona and his intensified inferiority complex drags him to exterminate her. The other reason for taking an extreme step is, he is dark but Desdemona is fair. So he wants to put out her light. By putting out her life, he can annihilate her fair-skinned splendor. He does not want to see her face when he murders her. Her charm or innocent face may change his intention of killing her. So he wants to put out the candle first. The other interpretation is to kill her first and then kill her passion for Cassio. He may intend to kill her first and then put an end to her treachery. It may be interpreted that since it is a soliloquy, he might have told himself to put out the love for her first and then put her life out. His love for her is passionate like the flame in a candle. The other way of taking it is, to put out the candle light first and then put her vision out by killing her. Here the light symbolizes her eyesight.

It may be interpreted that if Othello puts out the life of Desdemona, he will be arrested by the king and he will be in a dark cell with no trace of light. Hence he may be ready to put out the light in his life after killing her. He tells himself to kill her first and accept the confinement as a punishment. It may be taken as, Othello turns to be a wild animal like a panther to hunt down Desdemona, who is like a hind, prefers darkness to surmount the place of homicide. Since he prefers to bring out his hidden quality that is brutality due to persistent suspicion over Desdemona, he never wants to display his brutality to her before she dies. In order to maintain this hidden quality, he puts out the candle first. If he displays that, she may become alert. Consciously he knows that he is going to commit a cold blooded murder. His position as a moor never allows him to commit a crime by exposing himself. Killing any one as the Moor, in a battlefield during the day time is an act of bravery whereas killing her, he knows well, is an act of cowardice. So he blows out the light first.

A different look at the words of Othello is, Light may refer to the blessings and grace of God. So he wants to put out the feelings of benevolence and clemency from him first and then put out hers. He knows well that killing is a sinful act but deliberately wants to be a sinner. As far as he

is concerned his wife too is a sinner. So, he blows out the light first and admits himself a sinner and then blows out her life to reveal herself a sinner to the world. Light may refer to his love for her. He says to himself to put out first his love for her from his heart and then put out her life. The other interpretation is, light is the symbol of hope, his mind never gives a place for keeping hope on her. Hence he wants to put out the hope of love for her in him and then he puts out the hope of her life. He decides not to leave a glimpse of hope for her life. This is his mindset. Since he wants his "id" to come up, and his super ego which has been exposed till that time, he never wants his "id" to be seen. If he had not put out the candle first and murdered her, he would have shown his "id" to her and he would become insane and it is difficult for him to bring back his super ego. So he puts out the candle first in order to hide his "id". He is in the primordial state. Light may refer to the reasoning power. He decides not to use the reasoning power. He puts out the reasoning power from him first and puts out her life. So he is not even ready to enquire her. When God created the world, he blew light first and only then He created life on earth. So Othello thinks that darkness only would reverse the process of her sin.

If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me; but once put out thy light,
Thou cunning'st pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light relume. (Act 5, scene 1, line no 8- 13)

From all these plural perspectives – both physical and metaphorical - taken on reading Othello's words "Put out the light...", Shakespeare's flair in endowing his works with words and phrases packed with boundless interpretations can be discerned.

5. Macbeth's 'Out, Out, Brief Candle!' - Multiple Vistas

When Seyton informs Macbeth about the death of Lady Macbeth, Macbeth says:

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word,

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time, and all our yester-
days have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! (Act 5,
Scene 5, line 17- 22)[1]

Macbeth does not say that she died. Instead, he says that she should have died. Macbeth murdered Duncan, his guards, and Banquo and sent the professional killers in search of Banquo's family for killing them, and his actions led him to feel that he might have been involved in the murder of his wife also. Lady Macbeth washed her hands repeatedly when she was alive and told the doctor that the whole ocean of water would not clean her stained hands and all the perfumes of Arabia would not sweeten her little hands. The mental agony and disturbances suffered by Lady Macbeth due to her guilt and her frequent hand washing habit alarm and scare him making him feel highly responsible for the serial murders.

When he realizes that he is cornered and death approaches him fast, he looks at the burning candle which is in the final stage, and says that his life is to be put out. He may want his life to come to an end naturally. So he says, "Out, out brief candle" instead of saying, "Put out the candle". The candle may refer to his life, love for his post, love for his life, wisdom, Promethean light, hope or mercy of God. He feels that he is going to die since he loses them all.

6. Conclusion

Akin to Othello's candle, Macbeth's too indicates plural aspects and dimensions.

Incomparable is Shakespeare's expertise in evoking the pity of the audience in his tragedies and equally unique is the freedom bestowed upon the readers to explore his rhetorics. This exploration may trigger some more interpretations also.

7. References

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