

REFLECTION STATEMENT

MY ESSAY AIMS first to define what A.C. Bradley called “the tragic fact” as recognised by the persona of Shakespeare’s Sonnets and three characters from *Hamlet* and *Othello*, with the larger purpose to then analyse their responses to this tragic recognition.¹ I contend that the tragic life (preceding tragic catastrophe) is ordered into what I have named, in general terms, “a scheme of things,” and knowledge of this tragic fact constitutes the antecedent *anagnorisis* of Shakespearean tragedy. “The world is the totality of facts, not of things” (1.1), Wittgenstein proposes in the *Tractatus*, which I (mis)interpret as meaning that reality exists as a determined structure of relations, that we exist in a world where *things* receive *form*, and become *facts*. *Things* are thus organised in a *scheme* (*schēma* = form), and the scheme of things *is* the tragic fact. I focus next on how characters respond to this “tragedy” with certain *drives to mimesis*. Wittgenstein’s following statement becomes crucial: “We make to ourselves pictures of facts” (2.1); a *picture* refers to a “model of reality” or representation that we, as subjects, make of facts. Mimesis, in my thinking, is precisely a re-picturing or *misrepresentation* of facts that appeared objective into new schemes of things. My inquiry is centred on this concept of mimesis, and I analyse it further in terms of its figurations and its mechanisms, or what in my essay I discuss as *modes of exchange* and *mimetic principles*, aspects of the drives suggested in the Sonnets. These categories are explicated and systematised in a schema composed of topological, philosophical, psychoanalytic, and theological concepts that I have found useful as expository devices. It is offered in the appendix. “The Glass of Fashion: Shakespearean Mimesis in the Scheme of Things” is therefore an inelegant pun that introduces both my central concepts and the schema that contains them.

Investigating “success” as the Area of Study in the Preliminary Advanced course was an early influence, as I concluded that the highest form of success was an absolute freedom from the imprisonment suffered by characters in a world of ordered meaning. While I initially defined this as a Heideggerian experience of “being in time,”² my thinking was broadened in my study of “The Individual and Society” in the Preliminary Extension course, where I came to understand that a greater number of contexts influenced the individual’s sense of imprisonment, such as societal overdetermination. I ended up looking at time, hierarchy, and the fact of being created as the principal schemes of Shakespearean tragedy that prompt Hamlet’s complaint of the world: “To me it is a prison” (II.ii.240). Furthermore, exploring the topos of “Discovery” in English Advanced has shaped my own conceptualising of “mimesis,” since I have considered discovery, or *anagnorisis*, as “meaningful in ways that may be creative,” to quote from a rubric.

My essay also aims to practise what Northrop Frye popularised as “systematic criticism”³ when specifically applied to one author, rather than an entire canon of literature, although my various excursions into theology, philosophy, classical philology, and psychoanalysis cautiously attempt to trace certain lines of influence that are comprehended in the Shakespearean vision.⁴ To this end, I have constructed conceptual schemata by setting Shakespeare’s Sonnets as interpretive frames for Shakespearean tragedy. The genre theory I read for my English Extension 1 module strengthened my knowledge of classification systems for literature and may have unconsciously informed my decision to chart a typology of the drives.

I always concentrated on three main texts—the Sonnets, *Hamlet*, *Othello*—and other material that was relevant; studies of tragedy, for example, like Aristotle’s *Poetics*, Nietzsche’s *The Birth of Tragedy*, or Walter Benjamin’s *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*. My familiarity with Shakespeare originated with *Romeo and Juliet* (1595–96) and developed as I studied various Shakespearean dramas

¹ A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), p. 23.

² Northrop Frye uses such a phrase to describe “the basis of the tragic vision” (p. 3) in *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (1957).

³ Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957), *passim*.

⁴ Frye (*ibid.*) warns against the deductive application of extra-literary models in criticism, “determinisms” which propose “not to find a conceptual framework for criticism within literature, but to attach criticism to one of a miscellany of frameworks outside it” (p. 6).

each year in Critical Study-like units throughout High School. Fascinated by his characters and the beauty of his diction and imagery, I soon read Shakespeare's Sonnets, which moved me not only with their poetry, but by their philosophical and psychological depth, and their insights became a useful guide for interpreting Shakespearean drama.

I hope to appreciate such depth as I analyse the Sonnets alongside the tragedies; I sketched my opening vignette to foreground the poetic, philosophical, and psychological strength of the texts, styled after the personal essays of Ralph Waldo Emerson and inspired by the writings of Nietzsche, though my exact expression differs from both. Though it is difficult to identify the lyric poet of the Sonnets as the tragic dramatist of *Hamlet* and *Othello*, I attempt to draw out and explore the deep conceptual affinities in the form of a critical argument; I offer, essentially, a Shakespearean reading of Shakespeare. I considered "fictocriticism" as a text-type,⁵ but the critical essay offered greater scope to examine my concepts with sensitivity and analytical precision. I framed my argument as accumulative, so that each section could be best understood in the context of the previous sections; Othello's *ekstasis*, for example, contextualises Iago's Notion of Recognition, and Iago's godlike practice of self-fashioning in turn clarifies Hamlet's tragedy as a fashioned being.

With my chapter epigraphs and sequential paragraph scaffolding, I replicate the structural features of what Harold Bloom called Frye's "schematic form," which systematically expounds a "theoretical grammar" throughout the essay.⁶ My footnotes have followed the academic convention of citation, although I have occasionally used them with a definitional function, since my essay relies on a vocabulary I have drawn variously from philosophy and other places. In them I take opportunities to remark on anything I find interesting which, while not necessary to the argumentation, may aid the reader in gaining a clearer understanding of the symmetries I map, a practice I have adopted, though used more sparingly, from great philological surveyors like Ernst Robert Curtius.⁷

An appropriate place of publication would be scholarly journals like *The Kenyon Review*⁸ or the *Shakespeare Quarterly*,⁹ or perhaps even *Classical Philology*,¹⁰ where I hope my essay would make a valuable academic contribution to literary criticism as "an organized body of knowledge."¹¹ Academics are the intended audience, so I have ensured my language is lucid and terminologically precise. While I attempt to maintain a formal voice, I don't make unqualified assertions and assumptions masking as truths, but rather personal statements—"I think," "I interpret"—true only to my own experience. I certainly haven't shied away from difficulty, yet since leisurely readers may be able to benefit from the practical purpose of literary criticism as a reading supplement, I have avoided saturating my writing with undefined academic jargon, being careful to explain my terms when I may be discussing anything unfamiliar.¹² I took Harold Bloom's later work (1980s onwards) as a stylistic model, which sustains an accessible and personal style without sacrificing the academic eloquence and uncanny beauty of his earlier writings.

⁵ I considered writing something like Oscar Wilde's dialogue "The Decay of Lying" (1889), first published in *Intentions* (1891), or "The Critic as Artist," first published there also.

⁶ Harold Bloom, "A New Poetics," *Yale Review* 47 (Sep., 1957), p. 131.

⁷ See *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages* (1948).

⁸ *The Kenyon Review*, founded in 1939 by John Crowe Ransom, remains a leading literary magazine, and has published both Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom.

⁹ *Shakespeare Quarterly* is a peer-reviewed academic journal founded in 1950 and is devoted to studies of Shakespeare.

¹⁰ *Classical Philology* is a peer-reviewed academic journal founded in 1906 for study of the Greco-Roman arts, language, and history.

¹¹ Northrop Frye, "The Archetypes of Literature," *The Kenyon Review* 13(1) (Winter, 1951), p. 92. My work, though, is a conscious return to the philological criticism that has now been supplanted by "theoretical" academic approaches. My own study of mimesis necessarily comes into the shadow of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1947).

¹² Umberto Eco: "Always define a term when you introduce it for the first time!" (*How to Write a Thesis*, 1977; trans. Caterina Mongiat Farina and Geoff Farina; p. 152).

Refining my ideas and methodology required investigation into both Shakespeare-specific criticism and systematic criticism in general. Shakespearean criticism divides into the traditional humanist (classicist) appreciation of Shakespeare's art and characters, and modern academic study. Dr. Samuel Johnson,¹³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge,¹⁴ William Hazlitt,¹⁵ and A.C. Bradley¹⁶ have been most helpful regarding the former, while Helen Vendler¹⁷ and Stephen Greenblatt¹⁸ have reminded me of the necessity for an essay to include close reading and, in historicising Shakespeare, contextual detail.¹⁹ My coda section brings both approaches together in a final evaluation of Shakespearean mimesis.

For the centrepiece of my Major Work, its schema, my research was dominated by reading "systematic criticism" in various forms—Northrop Frye,²⁰ William Empson,²¹ Harold Bloom,²² Kenneth Burke,²³ René Girard,²⁴ Hayden White²⁵—which enhanced my understanding of the methodology. Bloom's "revisionary ratios" inspired me, though my schema differs visually from his tabulation.²⁶ As my thesis developed, I could do more concept-specific inquiry, reading Freud or Hegel for example, but rather than telescope my research into one philosophical tradition, I tried to read as widely as I could, so that my schemata accounted for the comprehensiveness of the Shakespearean vision and the nuanced complexity of Renaissance culture, influenced as it was by various forms of humanism and Christianity. With this wide-reading strategy, I resisted the forcing of a one-dimensional schematic interpretation onto my research, which I hope is evident my essay.

¹³ Dr. Samuel Johnson, *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765).

¹⁴ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures* (1808–1819).

¹⁵ William Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays* (1817).

¹⁶ A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904).

¹⁷ Helen Vendler's *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (1997) performs a remarkable parsing of each Sonnet that I commend, along with Booth's commentary (1977), to anybody interested in reading them.

¹⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980), *Hamlet in Purgatory* (2001), *The Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare* (2004), *The Norton Shakespeare* (ed.).

¹⁹ My particular historicism, aside from when I discuss Greenblatt, follows the Great Chain of Being and its relevant Platonism in the Renaissance. For this, I have primarily consulted Arthur O. Lovejoy's informative study *The Great Chain of Being: A Study in the History of an Idea* (1936).

²⁰ Systematic criticism covers all of Northrop Frye's work, but the books I researched specifically for this method were: *Fearful Symmetry: A Study of William Blake* (1947), *The Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (1957), *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (1965), *Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy* (1967), *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982), *The Myth of Deliverance: Reflections on Shakespeare's Problem Comedies* (1983).

²¹ William Empson's famed *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) classifies different types of "verbal nuance" with widely gathered examples that exemplify both his categories of ambiguity and his brilliance as a systematic critic.

²² The books of Harold Bloom's that I would consider to be of a "systematic" variety are: *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (1973), *A Map of Misreading* (1975), *Kabbalah and Criticism* (1975), *Figures of Capable Imagination* (1976), *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (1976), *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (1982), *The Breaking of the Vessels* (1982), *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1995), *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (2002), *The Anatomy of Influence: Literature as a Way of Life* (2011), *The Daemon Knows: Literary Greatness and the American Sublime* (2015). Frye is Bloom's begrudgingly acknowledged precursor, but I surmise that his Blakean and Kabbalistic origins make Bloom's imagination so wondrously systematic, even if his systems differ methodologically from Frye's own. Bloom has also written on Shakespeare in other books: *Ruin the Sacred Truths* (1989), *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1999), *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* (2003), *Possessed by Memory* (2019; forthcoming), and the series *Shakespeare's Personalities* (2018–19, forthcoming).

²³ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), *A Rhetoric of Motives* (1962).

²⁴ René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961), *Violence and the Sacred* (1979), *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (1991).

²⁵ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973). White also writes, somewhat systematically, on "mimesis" in *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect* (1999), which I mention in a footnote.

²⁶ See Chapter 5 ("The Map of Misprision") from *A Map of Misreading* and the figure beginning *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens*.

As my thesis and attempts to structure various schemata developed, I made two significant modifications in response to challenges or problems with my Major Work. The first was to expand my initial intention to focus on time as analysed through a psychoanalytic “framework,” since I found that I was wandering off into the esoteric and pigeonholing Shakespeare into a narrowly defined metaphysic, which relied too much on psychoanalytic reductions and inappropriate philosophical abstraction. Broadening my concept from “Time’s tyranny” to encompass the themes I labelled “the curse of service” (hierarchy) and “the suits of woe” (“metadrama” or theatrical-textual ontology) allowed me to explore the Sonnets in their fuller depth and variety, and illuminate areas of Shakespearean tragedy I had not previously considered. The second transformation of my essay was adding the thematic dimension of mimesis as a response to tragedy. Bernard McElroy’s survey *Shakespeare’s Mature Tragedies* (1973) first got me thinking about characters’ responses to tragedy in his emphasis on *how* characters reconstruct a coherent, subjective worldview as a response to the collapse of peripety, the ironic reversal of action. In this connection, I was further urged by Frank Kermode’s *The Sense of An Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (1967) with its premise that we make sense of our position in scheme of things by imposing a narrative order on our lives, but while Kermode focused on eschatology, I centred upon mimesis.

In the end, I made nine major revisions of the schema throughout the year, as logged in the Process Diary. At its inception, I was warned against treating my schema as if I were Procrustes, and I admit that at first, I stretched my ideas over his Bed. But after many nights of twisting and turning, the Bed has moulded itself to a Shakespearean form, and I now believe that the scheme of things in Shakespearean tragedy is rendered faithfully to the shared world that the Sonnets inhabit with Othello, Iago, and Hamlet. Shakespeare, as Keats recognised, is intuitive, protean, perhaps contradictory, and ultimately undefinable, but I have made to myself a picture of the fact, taking what might really be a Shakespearean satisfaction in giving form to things varied and elusive.