

The Shakespearean 'double plot'

Shakespeare often makes use of what we might call 'double plot' structure, in which one plotline or complex of situations mirrors, or comments upon, or reinterprets events that transpire in other dramatic situations. Often this takes the form of relatively minor characters and plotlines doubling events and situations from the 'main' dramatic narrative. How and where have you found this to occur in one of the texts we have read so far?

Two of the most prominent examples of the "double plot" structure can be found in *HAMLET* and in *KING LEAR*. For the play *HAMLET* the play-within-the-play 'The Moustrap' functions in this way. Hamlet stages a play in which the actors (in the roles of king, queen etc.) portray a story of murder in a royal court and thus this play imitates what really has happened in Elsinore. Gertrude and Claudius are among the spectators as is Hamlet, who does not watch the play for entertainment but in order to observe the reactions of his mother and the king to get hints for their guilt. Another "double plot" can be found in *KING LEAR*, where it is not limited to a play-within-the-play, but rather accompanies the course of events. The tragic story of King Lear and his daughters is mirrored in the equally tragic story of Gloucester, Edgar and Edmund. One of the functions of this device is to enhance the main plot and to show its universality as well as the immanent danger of repetition of these events.

Othello

'This fellow's of exceeding honesty.' So says Othello of Iago, whose perfidious duplicity turns out to be the downfall of a great many. Yet in what sense(s) *can* Iago be described as honest?

Iago brings harm and sorrow to many of the protagonists of *OTHELLO*, and most of the time he is only pretending to be honest. He obviously is very intelligent; however he uses his intelligence in a manipulative and maleficent way. Probably following the disappointment of not being promoted, all his creativity is used for his manipulations. It seems, as if by manipulating the others he wants to prove for himself his superiority over them. Throughout committing his crimes he is honest with only one person – himself. The structure of his character and his performed honesty and friendliness towards the other characters suggest a very structured and coldly calculating course of action: By succeeding he seems to get a gratification from his deeds that ultimately make him nearly immune to the judgment by others.

Macbeth

How do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth *differ* in how they are taken over by 'vaulting ambition' and led on to their treasonous deeds?

The structure of Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's ambition for their deeds can be described as a chiasmus: Macbeth starts as a doubting and hesitating character and ends being the one to force the tragic action of the play forward, although at the end of the play he cannot succeed anymore. Lady Macbeth is different: She starts at the beginning of the play as being the striving, convinced person and uses her husband as a tool for her purposes. For her, it is convenient that Macbeth might be a powerful soldier, but not a person that can handle political issues with tactfulness, as Macbeth

nearly always uses violence to fulfill his (and Lady Macbeth's) goals. However, starting at the better and stronger position, Lady Macbeth experiences a different kind of downfall: Unlike her husband she discovers her conscience which slowly brings her to madness and, at the end, suicide.

The Tempest

What does *The Tempest* gain from its clear preoccupation with spectacle and illusion? What philosophical work is done by the play's rumination upon these and related notions? Choose specific scenes for your discussion.

There are three fitting different parts from *THE TEMPEST* to briefly illustrate its relation with spectacle and illusion: A very interesting figure regarding this topic is Ariel, as he is not only a magician's servant, but also the spirit that is responsible for the tempest itself. It should also be noted that Ariel has the ability to move very fast and that he can change his form, which allows the recipient to experience him as a representative for spectacle but also allows the philosophical reading of him being very ambiguous, as e.g. his gender is unclear. The play also questions the cognition as Caliban talks about the music of the island, which obviously only he can hear, which would lead to the Kantian question of what can be perceived as real. In addition to that music alludes to emotions, and as they are often beyond words, puts them in the realm of the magical, too. Finally Prospero gives a commentary about the probable fictionality of the whole action of the play, where he abstractly compares theater with dreams, thus stressing the artificiality of art in general – but also hints at the possibility that life itself is a fiction.

Hamlet

At 3.2.334-41, Hamlet rails at Guildenstern, 'Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice in this little organ, yet you cannot make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played upon than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret upon me, you cannot play upon me.' How does this brief, yet explosive speech help characterize Hamlet as you know him from the play as a larger whole?

This speech of Hamlet illustrates several character traits: First it illustrates the wit of Hamlet, in which is clearly superior to Guildenstern. He parallels himself with a flute, an instrument Guildenstern claims he cannot play. Yet, Hamlet asserts that Guildenstern tries to "play on" him, meaning that he knows that Guildenstern tries to manipulate him. This knowledge of his position in regard to the other members of the court who try to ignore, harm or get rid of him shows that he is not only fully aware of this but also that he is able to defend himself. In contrast to the other characters he does so by words, not weapons or intrigues, at least not in this dialogue.

The Merchant of Venice

THE MERCHANT OF VENICE ruminates throughout upon themes of risk and adventure. Why?

Repeatedly several characters from THE MERCHANT OF VENICE take great risks to achieve their goals. The best example is Antonio who risks his life for Bassanio. Another example is Portia: She takes the risk of getting a “wrong” husband due to the choice of the three caskets, although this is not her idea of doing it this way. In contrast to Antonio's risk this can also be seen as an adventure as the quest for the right husband. Nearly all characters are being rewarded for taking risks, only Shylock remains empty-handed at the end of the play.