

Hamlet: Patterns of Imagery I

Imagery is defined as language that appeals vividly to the senses, particularly sight. Language that paints an **evocative picture** using **images**. Often, this language is linked to an **idea**, and in this way becomes figurative or symbolic. An example would be how all the vivid language depicting blood and bloodiness that is used in *Macbeth* is linked to the idea of guilt and how murder cannot be forgotten or forgiven or “washed away”: the murderer will pay for it, by way of both inside torment and revengers’ retribution. Also, in literary studies we are interested in how writers set up **image patterns**: not one or two but **many uses of similar images** that help structure the work and develop an important idea within it.

a) The pattern of disease imagery in Hamlet.

Important to *Hamlet* is the idea that Denmark was once a healthy state but is now sick, corrupted state, like a browning apple with a worm in it. Guardsman Marcellus sets the tone early in the play by stating “something is rotten in the state of Denmark”. The reason for this is that its court has been infected with various forms of sinfulness and destructive behaviour, starting off with the new king’s murderous, fratricidal treachery and his lust, along with the queen’s sexual disloyalty. Later, adding to the corruptive decay is Hamlet’s wildness, rashness and ruinous inability to act, Laertes’ too-easily-manipulated thirst for quick satisfaction in revenge and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern’s duplicitous betrayal of their boyhood friend. By the end the court is so diseased and rotten that all the deaths at the end almost seem like a bloodletting, the method doctors used at the time to try to rid a body of disease (let the tainted blood flow out of it).

Also, in Hamlet’s eyes the world and the people in it (especially women) have gone from seeming healthy and pure to sick and corrupted. In his eyes, the world has fallen, like a garden blasted with blight. This is reflected in his many uses of disease imagery. But Shakespeare puts images of sickness and corruption into the mouths of other characters to, finally driving home with vivid overall effect the idea that here is a fallen court whose core is being eaten away, as if by a worm or a pestilence, by the sinful, destructive, corrupt, fallen behaviour of the play’s main characters, especially Claudius.

Here’s a **list** of lines in the play where **disease imagery** occurs:

- I, ii, 130-136: Hamlet says his body and the world are contaminated.
- I, iii, 38-42: Laertes says spring flowers (young women) are especially in danger of getting infected (by sexual “stain”).
- I, iv, 23-36: Hamlet says that men who are in all other ways good can be corrupted by one vicious defect that undoes them.
- I, iv, 90: Marcellus states “something is rotten in the state of Denmark”
- I, v, 64-73: the Ghost describes the poison’s effect as a wickedly vivid kind of leprosy.
- II, ii, 181-185: Hamlet gruesomely links mother’s bodies with dead, putrefying dogs and the children that are bred from them with maggots.

II, ii, 295-298: Hamlet says most people like the air and sky but to him its all a swirl of pestilent vapours.

III, i, 52: The King hints that underneath the prostitute's made-up face there is ugliness (effects of syphilis etc.)

III, i, 117-123: Hamlet says our basic human nature is corrupted and virtue cannot be wholly grafted onto it. He then says don't be a "breeder of sinners".

III, i, 135: "plague for thy dowry".

III, ii, 173: "wormwood"

III, ii, 307: Hamlet describes his supposed madness as a disease of his wits.

III, ii, 372-374: Hamlet says the dead of night is when hell itself breathes out contagion to this world.

III, iii, 36: The King while before the altar says that his murderous deed is rotten and smells to heaven.

III, iii, 57: "corrupted currents of this world"

III, iv, 41-51: Hamlet is berating the queen with vivid images of her blistered, corrupted, whorish, sickening act: marrying and sleeping with her first husband's murderer.

III, iv, 64-65: Hamlet says that Old Hamlet and Claudius were like two ears on a head, but Claudius is a mouldy, diseased one that infected the clean one (and killed it).

III, iv, 75-80: Hamlet says it's like his mother's senses are all stricken with sickness.

III, iv, 92-94: "stew'd in corruption" – a pun here on "stew", which meant brothel.

III, iv, 147-157: Hamlet says that if his mother lives in denial of her sinful deeds they will still eat away under the skin like a corrupting ulcer. He then says don't add fertilizer to the weeds to make them grow more – in other words, don't just continue with Claudius as before.

IV, i, 19-23: Claudius says that his "love" for Hamlet has kept him from wiping him out, like a man with a disease who does not get it treated.

IV, iii, 9-10: Claudius says that serious diseases need drastic treatment.

IV, iii, 20-24: Hamlet remarks that worms and maggots eat us all in the end.

IV, iii, 66-67: "like a fever in my blood he rages and you must cure me, England"

IV, v, 14-17: Ophelia's madness feared to be a kind of ill-breeding contagion. Then Queen refers to her own "sick soul".

IV, v, 89-93: pestilent speeches infecting ears.

IV, v, 117-119: "brands the harlot on the chaste, unsmirched brow of my true mother."

IV, v, 180-181: Ophelia: "violets all withered when my father died"

IV, vii, 55: Laertes: "the very sickness in my heart"

IV, vii, 147-148: the poison called a "contagion". Note: almost all the corrupted main characters die by poison ("contagion") in the end, leaving the court ruined but no longer sick.

V, i, 151-152: the Gravedigger refers to plague-ridden bodies.

V, I, 157-158, 164: "your water is a sore decayer of your whoreson dead body." Then "a pestilence on him..."

V, i, 222-224: "Lay her in the earth, and from her fair and unpolluted flesh may violets spring".

V, ii, 68-70: Hamlet: "and is it not to be damn'd to let this canker of our nature come in further evil?"

A brief discussion of prostitution during Shakespeare's day will provide a link between image patterns a) disease and b) fakeness/acting. There were a lot of brothels ("stews") in London during Shakespeare's day, but while they provided men pleasure, they were also breeding places of disease. A lot of prostitutes had sores on their bodies, which they hid with make-up. Thus, prostitutes and the brothels they worked in are linked to the idea of disease, but also to the idea of deception and "fake appearance".

B) The pattern of fakeness/acting imagery in *Hamlet*

Hamlet, after his father dies and even more so after he finds out about the murder, sees the world as a false, hypocritical place where people are duplicitous and hypocritical fakers. He even thinks this about Ophelia, even though she is in fact true. Shakespeare has other characters also express an awareness of the world as a place where a lot of false acting goes on too. All in all, the wealth of fakeness/acting imagery in the play ties into the idea, once again, that this court is corrupted and "fallen" and that in such a place tragedy will inevitably occur until there is a regeneration. Such a regeneration does not obviously occur, but it's worth noting that left at the end to report all is Horatio: an honest, true, forthright and upright man.

Here's a **list** of a number of lines in this play in which **acting/fakeness imagery** occurs:

- I, ii, 76-86: Hamlet lectures his mother on *seems* vs. *is*
- I, iii, 103-135: Polonius lectures Ophelia about how young men can proclaim true love when they're only acting to get what they want at the moment.
- II, ii, 585-587: The Ghost could be a fake: a devil wearing a deceptive shape.
- III, i, 45-53: sweet looks or actions often hide a darker underneath. Polonius and Claudius both recognize this.
- III, i, 111-113: Hamlet: beauty tends to transform honesty and chastity into a prostitute.
- III, i, 142-145: Hamlet: women are painted actors.
- III, ii, 1-34: Hamlet lectures the actors on how to act (!)
- III, ii, 236-237: Hamlet speaks of love in terms of a puppet show.
- III, iii, 57-64: Claudius worries that you can't fake being a good guy when you're actually a villain in heaven the way you can here on earth.
- III, iv, 163-167: Hamlet: custom can dress up evil in angelic robes – make it seem ok.
- IV, vii, 107-109: The King tauntingly asks Laertes if his devotion to his father is true or merely "the painting of a sorrow, a face without a heart".

Also: Hamlet's use of many **puns** (too many to list) also inject a feeling of duplicity into the world of the play. In this place, language as well as action can seem to say one thing and really say another.

Hamlet Imagery II

C) Image pattern of discord

Elizabethans tended to have a faith in the **divine order** of nature. Everything had its proper place and function under God. It was all linked, like a golden chain. When all was well, a harmony reigned. There was a **natural harmony and a natural law**. However, when some **unnatural** act occurred, the idea was that it set off a **chain reaction** that threw everything into chaos until it was fixed. Using poetic license, writers might imagine that if the proper king was murdered, even nature might also show signs of chaotic discord (for example, the sun might be eclipsed, as happens in *Macbeth*). This was because everything was in sympathy with each other, so if some horrible dissonant note was struck, it threw off the whole symphony. Nothing can come to good in such a time of **discord**. It is bound to result in tragedy until it is righted.

Claudius' extremely unnatural act of killing the rightful king (who is also his brother) and then marrying with that man's wife (called a kind of incest) is a cursed act that throws everything into discord and is bound to set off a tragic chain reaction. Images of discord in the play support this, including the many times we see madness, which was thought of as a discord or unbalance of the faculties.

A list of discord images in *Hamlet*, then, follows:

I, i, 116-128: Horatio describes how all sorts of unnatural things happened in the sky and on earth after Julius Caesar was murdered in the Roman Senate by the conspirators.

I, v, 25-28: The Ghost states and then repeats that his murder by Claudius was not only foul but also "strange and unnatural". Of course, a ghost is already and unnatural thing, and Hamlet immediately suspected, earlier, that its appearance was linked to some lawless, evil act.

I, v, 196-197: Hamlet, after learning of the murder, states that the time is "out of the joint" and laments that he seems ordained to "set it right".

III, i, 157-160: Ophelia laments that Hamlet, in his madness, has his faculties all in disharmony, like bells ringing out of tune and clashing discordantly.

III, iv, 175-177: Hamlet believes that he has been ordained by heaven to be its righter and punisher, but he accepts that this will not mean that he is exempt from suffering for wrongs.

IV, i, 7-8: The Queen, lying on Hamlet's behalf, tells Claudius that he is actually mad, as mad as the sea and wind when they fight each other, lawless and wild. This is an image of discord.

V, ii, 374: Summing up the tragic events of the play, Horatio first of all mentions bloody, carnal and "unnatural" acts.